

WNBZ
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Legislators Debate State Land Moratorium, EPF Reductions

State legislators vowed to overturn a proposed reduction in the Environmental Protection Fund Tuesday, as nearly a dozen environmental advocates blasted Governor David Paterson's attempt to freeze state land acquisitions for the next two years and an associated proposal to slash the fund.

Faced with a pending \$7.5 billion shortfall in fiscal year 2010-2011, Paterson has proposed drastically reducing the balance in the Environmental Protection Fund to \$143 million, a \$79 million reduction from last year, while zeroing the line in the fund used for land acquisition.

The cash is slated to be moved into the state's general fund.

Dozens of environmental advocates testified before a joint hearing of the state Senate and Assembly Environmental Conservation committees.

Adirondack Council Legislative Director Scott Lorey told legislators that stripping the EPF of its funds is not only bad environmental policy, but could also devastate local economies.

"There are many good reasons for protecting open space. One example is that local governments receive financial assistance from state tax payments on forest preserve lands," Lorey said. "The assessor estimated that if the state were to acquire the Follensby Pond tract, local governments would receive an additional \$124,000 in state tax payments this year."

Adirondack Mountain Club Executive Director Neil Woodworth said Paterson's proposal to slash nearly 130 jobs between the Department of Environmental Conservation, the Adirondack Park Agency and the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation will leave the agencies unable to manage what the state already owns and represents a disproportionate burden being placed on environmental programs.

"Across 24 state agencies and offices in New York State a total of 630 full-time equivalents are being cut. Remember over 130 are being cut from our environmental and park agencies," Woodworth said. "I for one wonder why the environment must bare such a disproportionate level of funding."

Democratic legislators, like Long Island Assemblyman Steven Engelbright vowed to restore the EPF funding and salvage the environmental programs.

"They are a place that we as state government can utilize reassure our citizens that there is a positive future for them in New York," he said. "The last thing we need to do is have our parks become a big neon billboard that says New York is collapsing, run for your lives."

State Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation Commissioner Carol Ash told legislators that Paterson's proposed cuts would result in the closure of dozens of parks throughout the state.

And although legislators said that they are hoping to restore at least some of the EPF funding, they were less resolute in their opposition to the land acquisition moratorium.

According to DEC Commissioner Pete Grannis the current EPF proposal would allow state easements, but not outright fee acquisitions.

Hamilton County Board of Supervisors Chairman Bill Farber and Adirondack Local Government Review Board Executive Director Fred Monroe also testified before the joint committee.

Farber argued that in-park land acquisitions have been made hastily.

“We need to make sure that we have done sufficient planning, that we are confident that when we spent millions of dollars on land in the Adirondacks, it’s the right thing to do,” Farber said. “We have to know the economic impacts, the impacts on affordable housing.”

For Assemblywoman and ranking Republican on the Assembly Environmental Conservation Committee Teresa Sayward, the implications of continued state land acquisitions are clear.

“Our communities are struggling. Economic development is almost nothing other than tourism,” Sayward said. “Unless you own the motel, hotel or store, you are making minimum wage and as a result we are losing families.”

Democratic Assemblyman Kevin Cahill argued the Legislature isn’t always the enemy of the people of the Adirondacks and is very aware of the problems in the park.

“The Governor’s decisions to offer a moratorium on land acquisition will prevent us from being able to acquire very fragile lands in other places across the state,” Cahill said. “While I sympathize with the plight of the North Country communities and recognize that this has been an ongoing struggle for many years, I think it is important to remember that there are friends here in the legislature. Not just this year, but other years as well.”

Wrangling over Paterson’s proposed budget is expected to reach a fever-pitch in the coming weeks.

-Jon Alexander, 1-27-10