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Little wants local government to pick APA nominees

By CHRIS KNIGHT, Enterprise Senior Staff Writer

State Sen. Betty Little is planning to introduce legislation that would give local government officials more say in picking commissioners for the Adirondack Park Agency board.

Little, R-Queensbury, said her bill, which is still being drafted, would require the five in-Park commissioners on the APA board to be selected from a list of nominees presented to the governor by the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages, in collaboration with county boards of legislators and supervisors. The list would have five names on it at all times for the governor to pick from, she said.

"That way I think local government would feel they have some input in the selection of in-the-Park commissioners who really are representing the residents of the Park," Little told the Enterprise. "Right now, local government doesn't feel like it has enough input."

Little said the legislation has been talked about for a long time among AATV members, but she said Gov. David Paterson's recent nomination of Peter Hornbeck to the APA board prompted her to begin drafting the bill. Local government groups in the Park have opposed the nomination of Hornbeck because of his ties to environmental groups. An Olmsteadville boat builder, Hornbeck is a current board member of Protect the Adirondacks! and former chair of the Residents Committee to Protect the Adirondacks.

At Little's request, Hornbeck's nomination was tabled last week by the Senate's Environmental Conservation Committee. If approved, he would replace Commissioner Art Lussi, a Lake Placid hotelier, on the APA board.

Little said she's been lobbying for Lussi to keep his seat.

"He's only been on the board for one term," she said. "He represents business interests and understands the economy, certainly of the Lake Placid-Saranac Lake area, and the importance of tourism."

Although local government leaders don't see eye-to-eye with the Park's environmental groups, Little said her bill wouldn't prevent environmentalists from being picked for the in-Park seats on the APA board.

"There's nothing in the changes I'm making that say anything about qualifications, backgrounds or past experience," she said. "AATV has always talked about trying to find a balance between the economy and the environment. They'd have to look at both areas."

Bill Farber, an AATV past president and current board member, said the intent of the Legislature when it created the APA was to have people on the agency board that represent the views of people who live in the Park.

"We need to find a model that gets to that," he said. "While the board is much better now that it has been at other times, there's a concern about what happens as new appointments take place. Will the governors be sensitive and make sure that (the in-Park commissioners) reflect the views of the folks within the Adirondacks? Clearly Sen. Little is trying to find a construct that will guarantee that happens."

Adirondack Council spokesman John Sheehan said Little's bill would accomplish what had previously been the case under former Gov. George Pataki, a Republican.

"For the past 12 years, local government did get the opportunity, through the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board and others, to essentially pick the commissioners that were going to be chosen for inside the Park," he said.

Now, with a Democratic governor and Democratic-majority in the Legislature, the system that the Park's local government officials were used to is no longer in place, Sheehan said.

"From our perspective, we'd rather see this become something that would be negotiated as part of comprehensive reform of the Park Agency," he said. "We'd be perfectly willing to talk about that. But we think there's very little chance the current Legislature will pass the bill she's proposed so far."

Little is planning to introduce the bill, which she said is also backed by Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward, R-Willsboro, in the current session of the Legislature. She said she thinks she can win bipartisan support for the measure.

TL board backs Lussi, opposes Hornbeck

In related news, the Tupper Lake Town Council voted Monday to send a resolution supporting the reappointment of Lussi and opposing Hornbeck's nomination to the governor and the APA.

Town officials said Hornbeck has spoken out against the Adirondack Club and Resort project, which would raze and rebuild the Big Tupper Ski Area and develop the land around it with about 600 luxury housing units, a restaurant and a marina. The town council has been outspoken in its support for the development.

In the spring of 2006, Hornbeck raised concerns about the project at a forum on development in the Adirondacks held at Hamilton College. He was serving as the Residents Committee's chairman at the time.

"I think this project is way too big and I don't want it to happen," Hornbeck was quoted as saying in an Enterprise report about the event.

Town Supervisor Roger Amell said an APA board member should have an open mind toward development.

"You have to have the communities in your best interest," Amell said.

The Enterprise has tried to reach Hornbeck several times in the last week, but several phone calls to his business have not been answered.

Enterprise staff writer Jessica Collier contributed to this report.