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Officials urge yes votes on power line amendment

By CHRIS KNIGHT, Enterprise Senior Staff Writer

TUPPER LAKE - The president of the New York Power Authority, National Grid officials, state Sen. Betty Little and a host of local government leaders held a press conference here Tuesday to urge residents across New York to vote in favor of a state constitutional amendment when they go to the polls on Nov. 3.

The amendment would allow the state to swap six acres of Forest Preserve land in Colton for 43 acres owned by National Grid in the towns of Piercefield and Clare.

Approval of the land swap is the final step in a \$30 million upgrade to the electric distribution system in the Tri-Lakes, which included construction of a new, 23-mile electric transmission line to Tupper Lake, substation upgrades and other improvements.

The new power line was activated in May, but approval of the after-the-fact constitutional amendment is needed to make it all official.

"It would allow us to do, frankly, what we've already done," said NYPA President Richard M. Kessel, who called on voters across the state to support the amendment.

"We want to see it passed. The worst thing you can have is uninformed voters who, if they see something and there's a lot of language, they just click no. We've got to get them to click yes."

In February 2008, the state Department of Environmental Conservation, NYPA and National Grid signed an agreement that allowed the power line to be built across two miles of Forest Preserve land running along state Route 56 in Colton prior to approval of the constitutional amendment.

Although it was approved by the state Adirondack Park Agency, the unusual agreement drew criticism at the time from some APA commissioners who said it set a "dangerous" precedent.

Adirondack Council Executive Director Brian Houseal admitted his group was somewhat uncomfortable with that agreement but supports the proposed constitutional amendment.

"I think everyone was uneasy about that," he said. "But this was a power line that was needed to provide for the safety and welfare of Tupper Lake. Although we preferred not to do an after-the-fact, this is important for public health, safety and welfare."

Houseal said the alternate route for the power line would have had greater impact on the environment, cutting through extensive wetlands, an old-growth forest and habitat of the endangered spruce grouse.

The new, 46-kilovolt transmission line was designed to end frequent blackouts and power problems in Tupper Lake and other area communities.

"It will be obvious that the quality of life will be enhanced by the completion of this project," said Tupper Lake Mayor Mickey Desmarais.

"The ability to have reliable and adequate power is absolutely critical to the growth of our primary industry, which is tourism," added Lake Placid Mayor Craig Randall.

Tuesday's press conference was held in Tupper Lake, where the amendment will undoubtedly find plenty of support. But the fate of the proposition is in the hands of voters across the rest of the state, who may not know anything about it.

"To the person in New York City who looks at this on a ballot and says 'Oh no, they're taking down another tree,' that's scary," Little said. "I don't want to see them vote against this. If you know people in the rest of the state, see that they go in and check that constitutional amendment."

The only organized effort to raise support for the amendment has been coordinated by John Sheehan of the Adirondack Council, who has been meeting with news media across the state for the past few weeks.

NYPA officials and National Grid representatives also said they would work to spread the word at other events in the next week-and-a-half.

If, for some reason, the amendment isn't approved, National Grid Upstate Vice-President Susan Crossett said they'll try again.

"We will again go back at a constitutional amendment if it indeed fails, but we're very confident it won't," she said.

Little said she's talking with the Adirondack Council about the possibility of creating a "land bank" to avoid the need for a constitutional amendment for similar projects in the future.

The \$30 million cost of the Tri-Lakes electric project was split between National Grid, NYPA and the villages of Tupper Lake and Lake Placid.

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