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On the Ballot: Parkland and Inmate Volunteerism

By NICHOLAS CONFESSORE

New York voters will be asked to consider two amendments to the State Constitution on Tuesday: One would approve a power line being built in the Adirondack Park; the other would allow prisoners of state correctional facilities to perform volunteer work for nonprofit groups.

The power line was switched on in May, but voter approval is needed to seal a deal transferring up to 6 acres of the park in St. Lawrence County to National Grid, a power company, in exchange for 43 acres of National Grid's land.

While environmental advocates have opposed past land swaps, this one has won broad support from environmentalists and local officials. Without the land swap, they say, National Grid would have had to build the power line through privately owned, old-growth forest.

Because the six-million-acre park is protected by the Constitution's "forever wild" provision, any development within its borders must be approved by an amendment. Past amendments have allowed the construction of ski slopes, airport runways and even a cemetery within the park.

If the amendment is approved by voters on Tuesday, supporters said, the park will gain a large, unspoiled swath of wilderness for the relatively small parcel, along an existing road, that National Grid is using.

"It's not the most pristine parcel we have," said John F. Sheehan, communications director of the Adirondack Council, an environmental group. "It will be replaced by 43 acres on the Grasse River, which is a really beautiful spot."

The second amendment would allow the State Legislature to draw up a law permitting prisoners to volunteer at churches, social service groups and other nonprofit organizations.

While prisoners are now allowed to serve on municipal work crews, the Constitution bars them from working for private entities, a provision originally intended to prevent prisoners from being exploited. An advisory opinion issued by the state's Commission of Correction in 2005 found that the same prohibition could also apply to work performed for religious, charitable and educational organizations.

The change is supported by many prisoner advocates, who believe such work — as long as it is not compulsory — can be useful.

"It can be helpful in repaying society, rehabilitating them and re-acclimating them to people in the world," said Assemblyman Jeffrion L. Aubry, a Democrat from Queens and chairman of the Assembly's Correction Committee. "That's why we pursued that."

To be put on the ballot, constitutional amendments must be approved by both houses of the Legislature during two successive legislative sessions. Both of the amendments on Tuesday's ballot have been passed overwhelmingly two times by the Senate and the Assembly.