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Push for Tupper Lake Land Swap Picking Up Steam

With November 3 looming, state officials and environmental groups are continuing to lobby New Yorkers to vote in favor of a constitutional amendment allowing the construction of an already-built power line on state Route 56 in Tupper Lake.

And officials believe that voters in the New York City metro region are key to its passage.

According to state Power Authority Executive Officer Richard Kessel, the \$30 million, 23-mile long National Grid power line is essential for Tupper Lake, which has experienced numerous power outages during the winter months over the last several years.

And Kessel says voters around the state need to be aware of the power line's importance.

"This is a statewide constitutional amendment and we want to see it passed," Kessel said. "The worst thing you can have is uninformed voters who see something and there is a lot of language they just click no. We have got to get them to click yes."

The power lines cross roughly six acres of Forever Wild state forest preserve near Sevey Corners on state Route 56. And as with any project that requires the disturbance of wild forest in the Adirondacks, a constitutional amendment must pass both legislative houses twice and then be approved by public referendum.

But Kessel adamantly assured Tupper Lake residents that the lines won't be torn down and service will not be affected if the referendum fails.

The state Senate and Assembly passed the amendment in 2007 and 2008, and it will be on the ballot this coming election day.

Several constitutional experts recently told WNBZ that the process of seeking a referendum to approve the amendment after the fact is quote – "an end around on the constitution."

But according to Adirondack Park Agency spokesman Keith McKeever the agency's approval of the project is its own attempt to deal with the cumbersome nature of the APA Act.

"It is a difficult process, a constitutional amendment. It does take two seatings from both legislative houses in the state of New York," McKeever said. "There may be another approach to the issue and we look forward to working with our elected officials and advocacy groups to see if there is a possible way."

Little is currently pushing for the creation of a land bank that could be tapped when a needed project would infringe on wild forest.

The project is procedurally atypical due to a memorandum of understanding between the state Department of Environmental Conservation, the Power Authority and National Grid that allowed it to go forward prior to being passed by the voting public.

According to the memorandum, if the measure fails to garner public support, it will be up to National Grid to continue to push until a referendum is adopted by state residents.

And for Adirondack Council spokesman John Sheehan, the community and the good of the wild forest both stand to benefit from the project.

“We were more than happy to agree when the power authority proposed a constitutional amendment,” Sheehan said. “That works best for us because there is no significant environmental damage that can be done on the roadside. In fact it may make it easier for drivers to see deer crossing the road which are very abundant up there.”

Kessel says there’s concern among residents that an uneventful election season could lead to low voter turnout and the potential defeat of the referendum.

“In my view is important is that we get the people from the Tri-Lakes to vote for this amendment,” Kessel said. “But even more important is that we get the people from Long Island, New York City and Westchester County to vote yes on this matter because it is important for the environment and reliability of electric service in the state.”

Little, Sheehan and Kessel all pledged to travel the state and attempt to garner support from a public who is often unaware of Adirondack issues.

According to Sheehan, the council has focused on New York City because of the likelihood of relatively high voter turnout because of the mayoral election.

“I have to spend some time in New York City because they have a mayoral race down there which will drive up voter turn out,” Sheehan said. “I have already spoken to the daily news and the post and I plan to talk with the times this week.”

If adopted, the amendment would swap 43 acres on the Grasse River currently owned by National Grid for the six acres that were disturbed by the project.

-Jon Alexander, 10-21-09