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## Victoria Pool might still close

By Paul Post, Special to The Record

SARATOGA SPRINGS — State parks thought to be safe from the chopping block might not be protected at all.

Gov. David Paterson recently announced plans to close 41 parks and 14 historic sites statewide to save \$6.3 million from a projected \$8.2 billion budget gap.

Numerous other facilities, including Victoria Pool at Saratoga Spa State Park, would be kept open by taking \$5 million from the state's Environmental Protection Fund. However, state law prohibits the use of EPF money for operations.

"This is a dodge by the governor's office," said John Sheehan of the Adirondack Council environmental group.

Under Paterson's current proposal, nine parks and historic sites in the Saratoga-Capital Region would close including Thacher Park and Schuyler Mansion in Albany County, and Bennington Battlefield, Hudson River Islands and Schodack Island state parks in Rensselaer County.

Without EPF money, Victoria pool and five more places would close, too — Peebles Island State Park in Waterford; Cherry Plain and Grafton Lakes state parks and Crailo historic site in Rensselaer County; and Minekill State Park in Schoharie County. Combined, this means 75 percent of all Saratoga-Capital Region facilities would close.

The Legislature could approve use of EPF funds in special circumstances. Last year, for example, it took \$10 million to help balance the state budget. But Sheehan said he doesn't believe lawmakers will take the political risk of doing that again during an election year.

"The integrity of the EPF is a high priority for many in the Legislature," said Steve Englebright, D-Long Island, chairman of the Assembly Tourism, Parks, Arts and Sports Development Committee.

The EPF was originally created to pay for land acquisitions, close landfills and build recycling facilities. Later, it was expanded to help pay for parks department capital projects.

"It cannot be used to pay for day-to-day salaries or operating expenses," Sheehan said.

However, parks spokesperson Eileen Larrabee said there's no other way to keep many sites open in this crisis situation. "Without it, we would be facing greater cuts," she said.

Larrabee said only a few of New York's parks — such as Bethpage on Long Island and Niagara Falls — are self-sufficient. Most lose money, she said.

Fees and admissions only cover 40 percent of the department's expenses, she said. The rest comes from the state's general fund — taxpayers.

Money in the EPF, totaling about \$212 million, comes from a real estate transfer tax. Each time there's a real estate transaction, anywhere in the state, a small portion of money goes to the fund.

If the parks department is allowed to use EPF money for operations, environmentalists fear other state agencies will try raiding it, too. Money would no longer be available for the fund's original purpose.

Englebright said he believes parks can be kept open without tapping into the EPF. One idea is to offer a multi-year Empire State Pass that would bring in extra money for the 2010-11 fiscal year. Also, out-of-state campground users could be charged more than in-state residents.