

Adirondack Daily Enterprise
December 3, 2011

APA close to filling economic affairs post

By CHRIS KNIGHT ,

Senior Staff Writer

The state Adirondack Park Agency is close to filling what's seen as a key economic affairs position, and it couldn't come at a better time.

APA officials haven't announced who will be hired as the agency's new special assistant for economic affairs, a position that has been vacant since the retirement of Saranac Lake resident Steve Erman in September 2010. But they have hinted that the job will be filled soon.

The first clue came at last month's two-day agency meeting, which was dedicated to the board's review of the Adirondack Club and Resort project. Several commissioners suggested more help may be needed to evaluate the potential fiscal and economic impacts of the proposed Tupper Lake resort, the largest project ever to come before the agency board.

"This will be my normal request for realizing how much we need an economic person as part of the agency staff," said Commissioner Arthur Lussi. "Our review of this project is demonstrating this extreme need from an analytic standpoint."

"I understand you will be very happy next month, Mr. Lussi," responded APA Chairwoman Lani Ulrich.

Asked if that means the agency will be hiring someone to fill the position, APA spokesman Keith McKeever, in an email to the Enterprise, said "We anticipate an announcement regarding the economic affairs position prior to the agency's December meeting."

The APA board is scheduled to meet Dec. 15 and 16 to continue its review of the resort project, with a final decision expected at the agency's January meeting.

Erman had served as the agency's special assistant for economic affairs since 1982. His role was to provide economic and fiscal analysis of a project to the agency's staff and board. Erman also performed outreach to economic development organizations and local governments on how land use is regulated in the Park. He often served as a liaison between the APA and a project's developer in the pre-application stage, providing assistance on how to fit a proposal within the agency's guidelines.

Representatives of the Park's environmental groups and local government organizations were pleased to hear that the vacant economic affairs position may finally be filled.

"It is encouraging to see employment going back in the other direction at the Park Agency, period," said Adirondack Council spokesman John Sheehan. "They've taken way too many budget cuts and have had too many losses in staff as a result of state funding shortfalls.

"It's important for the agency to understand the economic aspects of the projects that are brought before it. Having staff with that expertise has always been valued at the Park Agency. I know local government had high regard for Steve Erman's work, and a lot of people can say that. We hope we get somebody as good."

Fred Monroe, executive director of the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board, said local government advocates had asked Gov. Andrew Cuomo's regional economic development councils to allow the agency to fill what he described as a very important position.

"The standards the APA has to follow is that there be no undue adverse impact in considering the economic benefits of a project, so you need to have someone do that kind of analysis," Monroe said. "I think it's pretty clear in the APA Act that they're supposed to look at that."

The new hire comes at a critical time in the APA's review of the Tupper Lake resort project. At last month's meeting, Commissioner Richard Booth said the agency's findings about the resort's potential economic and fiscal impacts are "problematic."

"Staff said to us, 'The record does not provide reliable support for the project sponsor's positive fiscal impact projections. This makes it difficult to assess the extent to which or at what pace the affected municipalities might benefit from the proposed project.' That's a significant problem if that's what the record actually reflects."

"What is the scenario if this project goes into default?" asked Commissioner Cecil Wray. "Who ends up owing this project and what are the impacts and consequences on the various stakeholders?"

Agency staff were tasked with trying to answer those and other questions at this month's meeting. Whether they'll be able to rely on the new economic affairs assistant for help remains to be seen.

"That's a tall order," Monroe said. "The transcript is over 4,000 pages and there's 10,000 pages of records. That's quite a lot to ask of somebody to start and immediately tackle that."

Adirondack Council Executive Director Brian Houseal also doubted whether the new hire could come up to speed so quickly.

"Certainly the staff could brief that person and it depends on who the individual is who takes that position, Houseal said. "But it would seem to me premature to throw that person into such a big project until they have time to learn about the economic situation in the Adirondacks and get a better sense of what's happening in and around Tupper Lake. I have no expectations that that would be a significant impact to the project review at this point."

Contact Chris Knight at

891-2600 ext. 24 or cknight@adirondack

dailyenterprise.com.