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Cuomo has chance to recast APA

Chairman says leaving is personal; not influenced by governor's office

By BRIAN NEARING Staff writer

ALBANY -- Gov. Andrew Cuomo will put someone new in charge of state policy in the Adirondacks following the surprise announcement last week by Adirondack Park Agency Chairman Curt Stiles that he is leaving.

Cuomo has a chance to recast the APA: The chairmanship is just one of five seats that he can now appoint on the 11-member agency, which controls land use regulations in the 6 million-acre Adirondack Park.

In a contentious four years as chairman, Stiles was opposed by some Adirondack lawmakers and others as being too focused on protecting the environment at the expense of encouraging business development.

On Monday, Stiles said his decision to leave effective Aug. 12 was a personal one, and not related to any direction from the governor's office. "I had no direct conversations with the governor," he said. "My decision is mine alone."

The 68-year-old retired business executive, who lives in Harrietstown, Franklin County, said he will spend more time with family and "this time, I'm going to stay retired."

Conservation groups were caught flat-footed by Stiles' announcement at the end of an agency meeting Friday. His four-year term as chairman expired June 30. Late last year, Stiles told a Times Union reporter he wanted to remain as APA head, but Monday said "a lot can change in a year."

Adirondack Council spokesman John Sheehan said Stiles was "constantly under attack by people who want to see the APA go away. (Curt) Stiles was looking for a clear signal from the governor's office that he would get support. ... I guess he got his answer."

A call to the governor's office was not returned Monday. Cuomo now has five seats -- out of eight that the governor can appoint, with approval from the state Senate -- in which the current member's term has expired.

The other seats are held by Arthur Lussi of Lake Placid, Frank Mezzano of Speculator, William Thomas of Johnsbury, and Cecil Wray of New York City. Those members will continue to serve until replaced.

Cuomo can "remake the agency in his own image. Everyone will be watching his next move," Sheehan said.

A former director of the Adirondack Council, Stiles was named to the APA in 2001 by then-Gov. Eliot Spitzer. One of his fiercest critics was Fred Monroe, director of the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board, which represents the park's 92 towns and 12 villages to the agency.

In a blistering report to the governor's office last fall, Monroe likened the APA under Stiles to British occupation during the Revolutionary War. Stiles fired back, calling such claims a "breach of trust" and full of "inaccuracies that border on fabrication."

On Monday, Monroe praised Stiles as "someone who tackled the tough issues" and insisted his relationship with Stiles had improved since last fall.

Monroe said the governor should name a new chairman who is "not extreme on either side -- either property rights or environment. I hope all five appointments are moderate."

Monroe said the review board has compiled a list of 13 potential candidates for eligible seats and passed it to state Sen. Betty Little. The Queensbury Republican also voiced criticism of the APA under Stiles as being too focused on environmental protection.

A call to Little for comment was not returned.

Sheehan said Stiles' departure, coupled with last year's derailment of the nomination of Olmsteadville resident Peter Hornbeck to fill Lussi's seat, could be taken as a sign pro-development advocates might be gaining the upper hand at the agency.

"They delivered an unmerciful beating to Pete Hornbeck last year," said Sheehan. "If that kind of McCarthyism is going to continue, the Adirondacks are in trouble."