

State reaches deal to buy 69,000 acres

By CHRIS MORRIS

LAKE PLACID - The biggest addition to the Adirondack State Forest Preserve in more than 100 years was made official during a press conference here Sunday afternoon.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo joined environmental leaders and elected officials at Lake Placid's Conference Center to sign and announce the state's deal to acquire some 69,000 acres of former Finch, Pruyn and Co. timberland from The Nature Conservancy. Rather than one contiguous block of land, it consists of many, widely dispersed parcels. The bulk of the property is in the central Adirondacks around Newcomb, but some parcels are even outside the Adirondack Park boundary to the southeast.

The state will purchase the land over a five-year period for a total of \$49.8 million, using funds set aside in the Environmental Protection Fund. The first payment of \$13 million will be made in this fiscal year, and the final one will be made by 2016-17. The state will pay local property and school taxes on the land, as it does for the Forest Preserve in general.

"This is going to invest in the asset," Cuomo said, "and in terms of economic development, and in terms of preserving the asset, what we're doing is we're putting another blue ribbon on what was a national and international tourism destination, gift and preservation of nature.

"What it winds up punctuating is: This is the place of preservation, and this is the place of conservation. And if you want to enjoy nature in its pristine state, this is the place to do it."

Cuomo said the purchase will complement the 2010 acquisition of conservation easements on 89,000 acres of former Finch land. He said it strikes a balance between preservation and access. The governor said the public will have numerous opportunities for hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, mountain biking and other recreational pursuits. The purchase will also pave the way for a better network of snowmobile trails throughout the Adirondack Park, he said.

"(The purchase) understands that we need to conserve, we need to preserve," Cuomo said. "We also need to have a unit that is functional. We also have to have local governments that have revenues that pay annoying things like taxes. We also have occupations that we have to perform, we have people who need jobs. And this also understands that balance.

"And there are going to be economic commercial activities by making parts of the Park available for recreational activities that didn't happen before. There'll be snowmobiling trails where they didn't exist before; there'll be paddlers going where they didn't go before; there'll be rafters going where they couldn't have gone before."

Joe Martens, commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Conservation which manages the Forest Preserve, said the land deal doesn't just benefit those who are fit enough to explore the backcountry. He said DEC and the state Adirondack Park Agency will work with local governments to develop land-use plans that encourage public access.

"It's going to be an open process, and we're going to invite the public extensively so they can let us know what they think about how these lands ought to be used and how they ought to be accessed," Martens said.

Bill Ulfelder is executive director of The Nature Conservancy in New York state. He said the purchase is an investment in the state's economy.

"The Adirondacks receive 10 million visitors a year," Ulfelder said. "Those visitors put over a billion dollars a year into the regional economy. Outdoor recreation generates \$11 billion a year for the New York economy and employs over 130,000 people. This is a powerful engine for the health and sustainability of this region."

The deal includes the Essex Chain of Lakes, part of the Hudson River, the Boreas ponds and the McIntyre Tract, as well as OK Slip Falls and several smaller pieces of land in the southeast part of the Park.

Some of the lands involved in the deal still have hunting clubs that were given extensions on previous leases and allowed to remain on the land by The Nature Conservancy. Martens said these will be phased out over time, starting once the acquisition is complete.

Land deals like the one announced Sunday are often controversial. Numerous counties and towns within the Park have passed resolutions opposing the state buying these lands, and an online petition has been circulating in recent months asking the state to buy conservation easements rather than the land itself. Meanwhile, environmental groups have been passing around a petition in support of the purchase.

Martens said he's been in constant contact with opponents of the deal, like state Sen. Betty Little, who wasn't able to attend the press conference. Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward, another lawmaker often critical of state land purchases, was in Lake Placid on Sunday, and she said this particular deal strikes the right balance.

"This will definitely benefit our communities because of increased access," she said.

Local government officials have also questioned state land purchases, but Essex County Board of Supervisors Chairman Randy Douglas said he's confident some of those concerns - like access for the disabled - have been addressed in this agreement.

"At this point, I believe the board will be full steam ahead of supporting this issue, with a resolution, too," he said. "There's always going to be people out there that don't want the state to have any more property acquisitions. I think this is the best compromise for the community to have access to beautiful land."

Brian Houseal, executive director of environmental advocacy group the Adirondack Council, credited Mike Carr, executive director of The Nature Conservancy's Adirondack Chapter, for putting in years of work leading up to this week's agreement.

"Every community that's going to be affected by this deal will benefit economically as well as in terms of advancements for the North Country," Houseal said.

The contract between the state and The Nature Conservancy was executed with Cuomo's signature on Sunday; it still must be approved by the state attorney general and comptroller. Martens said in a matter of months, the state should be able to open "significant portions" of the property.

© Copyright 2012 Adirondack Daily Enterprise. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.