

Associated Press
May 7, 2016

Adirondack land-use decisions draw praise and criticism

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<http://m.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/may/7/adirondack-land-use-decisions-draw-praise-and-crit/>

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) - With his frequent trips to fish, boat and snowmobile in the Adirondacks, Gov. Andrew Cuomo has earned admiration from local leaders for his understanding of issues faced by the region's economically stressed hamlets.

But some environmental advocates say his administration has placed local desires for easy recreational access ahead of wilderness protection, citing decisions favoring motor vehicles, bicycles and snowmobiles in recent additions to the 2.6 million acres of state-owned Forest Preserve.

The tug-of-war between motorized and footpath-only advocates is flaring anew as the state drafts a land-use plan for the Boreas Ponds tract, the last and most highly prized piece of a 65,000-acre Adirondack land purchase initiated by Cuomo in 2012.

"The administration has placed quite a bit of emphasis on the local government belief that only motorized access benefits the local economy," said Neil Woodworth, of the Adirondack Mountain Club. "We don't believe that," he said, citing tourism growth in Keene Valley where climbing the High Peaks is the main attraction.

Richard Booth, a commissioner on the state's Adirondack Park Agency, which governs land use in the region, denounced the agency's recent decision to amend the State Land Master Plan law so bicycles and maintenance vehicles could be used on dirt roads in the Essex Chain Lakes tract,

an earlier purchase in the 65,000-acre acquisition of former Finch timber company land. Two environmental groups are suing the state over that decision.

“This establishes a precedent that can be done over and over” to allow activities prohibited in areas the law designates as deserving the highest level of protection, said Booth, an environmental law professor at Cornell University.

Park agency spokesman Keith McKeever said the amendment related to the Essex Chain was thoroughly vetted over more than two years, including a public comment process.

Joe Martens, Cuomo’s former environmental commissioner who was involved in the Essex Chain decisions, said the 65,000-acre purchase would not have been possible without including local government leaders in access decisions. Local leaders have long opposed expansion of the state-owned Forest Preserve which makes up nearly half of the 6-million-acre Adirondack park.

State law gives the towns veto power over acquisitions.

“This administration has been very attentive to local government needs in a very positive way,” Martens said. “We had to prove to them that state land could be very good for local government because it draws all types of people for recreation.”

In the Essex Chain, the goal was to balance wilderness protection with access for canoeing, hiking, bicycling, horseback riding and snowmobiling, Martens said.

Local government leaders praised Cuomo for including them at the table.

“Cuomo clearly has a better personal understanding of the need for balance,” said Fred Monroe, retired Town of Chester supervisor. “Governor Cuomo has taken it upon himself to personally visit the region and speak publicly about the importance of balancing resource protection with economic development.”

Bill Farber, chairman of the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages, said Cuomo has been working closely with local government to market the region as a destination for a wide range of recreational users.

“New York state has done a very good job of open space protection through multiple administrations,” Farber said. “Where we’ve struggled is how to keep our communities vibrant.”

There are 100 towns and villages within the 6-million-acre Adirondack Park.

Peter Bauer, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks, said Democrat Cuomo has given more control to local leaders who represent 130,000 people and ignored the concerns of 19 million New Yorkers who pay more than \$90 million in local taxes on state-owned land in the Adirondacks.

“The amendment to the State Land Master Plan was the first time we’ve had a governor weaken protections for the Forest Preserve,” Bauer said.

William Janeway, executive director of the nonprofit Adirondack Council, said Cuomo has fostered more open communication among all the interest groups. “But the expansion of motorized recreation in the wrong places threatens the special character of the Adirondacks that attracts millions of visitors from across the state and around the world,” Janeway said.

The focus now is on the 20,500-acre Boreas Ponds tract, purchased by the state last month. Environmental groups want it added to the adjacent High Peaks Wilderness Area, while local leaders want at least part of it open to vehicles.