

Voters to weigh in on land bank measure

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PLATTSBURGH, A constitutional amendment will be on the ballot in November that would create a land bank to improve public safety and telecommunications in the Adirondack Park and Catskills.

The proposed Health and Safety Land Accounts amendment was approved this week by the State Legislature for a second straight session, which is required to get a constitutional amendment on the ballot.

It also approved enabling legislation about how the new amendment would be administered.

EASE DEVELOPMENT

The constitutional amendment would let local governments perform such work as straighten town and county roads and install infrastructure such as telecommunications/broadband projects along rights-of-way that cross "Forever Wild" state Forest Preserve lands, the Adirondack Council said in a press release.

And, along with easing development of new municipal water systems and bike paths, it would allow replacement of culverts and bridges, including a span in Middletown.

At present, any of those projects would require a separate constitutional amendment, the Adirondack Council said.

The land bank, totaling 250 acres, would offset the use of protected Forest Preserve lands.

CUTTING RED TAPE

State Assemblyman Billy Jones (D-Chateaugay) said the amendment would be critical to cut red tape for the towns and counties in the Adirondacks.

"Forcing small projects, like straightening a road to make it safer or building bike paths, to go through years of bureaucracy hurts public safety, hurts our economy and hurts our residents," he said in a statement.

"This legislation helps streamline projects and opens up funding and economic opportunities while helping bring broadband to underserved communities."

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State Sen. Betty Little (R-Queensbury) said legislators worked with numerous local officials in crafting the measures.

"Those are the people who know all the key issues facing the Adirondacks," she said.

'VERY WORKABLE'

The measure would allow for utility and infrastructure installation and improvements within a 50-foot right-of-way for roads, plus an extra 10 feet to either side.

Projects that go beyond that reach would be able to swap similar size pieces of property from the land bank.

Its language also contains provisions to ensure such work is minimally invasive and requires legislative approval for projects that would take place more than one-fourth of a linear mile from the road.

"It's very good measure, very workable. I think it's going to be very helpful," Little said.

In addition, the State Environmental Quality Review Act, Freshwater Act, Adirondack Park Agency Act, Clean Water Act and all other laws that are inconsistent with provisions of this constitutional amendment would continue to apply to all projects.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Jones said the measure supports vital conservation efforts in the Adirondacks and the North Country, while also taking into consideration the importance of health and safety.

He thanked Little and Assembly Environmental Conservation Committee Chair Steve Englebright, Assemblyman Dan Stec (R-Queensbury), the other Assembly members who supported the effort and all of the local public officials, agencies and groups who helped craft the measures.

Others critical to the amendment's passage include the State Department of Environmental Conservation, Adirondack Mountain Club, Nature Conservancy, Adirondack Wild, the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages, Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board, and Adirondack Common Ground Alliance, as well as Citizens Campaign for the Environment, the Catskill Center

for Conservation and Design, Environmental Advocates, Scenic Hudson, the Catskill Mountainkeeper, and the NY League of Conservation Voters. Protect the Adirondacks Executive Director Peter Bauer welcomed the legislature's actions.

"The new amendment will help to continue to build and develop communities throughout the Adirondacks. Extending broadband fiber cable to remote communities of the Adirondacks will help to expand educational and economic development opportunities," he said.

"This amendment also makes it easier for local roads maintenance projects where roads are bordered by the Forest Preserve, siting of municipal water wells, and for building a network of bike paths between Adirondack communities."

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MADE THE CASE

North Country Chamber of Commerce President Garry Douglas welcomed passage of the measures, the last step required for the amendment to be on the November ballot statewide.

"In the end, it was an especially heavy lift in the Assembly, but in the final hours, Billy Jones's relationship with Majority Leader Joe Morelle and Speaker Carl Heastie and the respect they have for him, helped get it done," he said.

"We were communicating with both offices all afternoon and evening, and they were clear about how effectively Billy was making the case to them and to other colleagues. We thank Betty Little, Billy Jones, Dan Stec and the North Country delegation for not allowing this year's legislative agenda to wrap up without putting this historic action before the voters for hoped for approval in November."