

Voters to decide on state land bank amendment

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The New York State Legislature Thursday passed a proposed constitutional amendment that would create a 250-acre land bank for the Adirondack and Catskill parks, decreasing the time it takes to get smaller projects on state Forest Preserve land approved. (Editor's note: An earlier version of this article incorrectly said the land bank would be 750 acres.)

The land bank could be utilized to approve important local projects on Forest Preserve lands without a need to amend the state constitution in each instance. The amendment and enacting legislation include numerous safeguards protective of Article 14 of the constitution, according to state Senate officials.

State lawmakers have met in Albany over the past several months to work out an agreement with local officials including representatives of the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages and Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board; environmental groups including the Adirondack Council, Adirondack Mountain Club, Protect the Adirondacks!, Adirondack Wild, and The Nature Conservancy; and the Department of Environmental Conservation.

On Thursday night, state Sen. Betty Little, R-Queensbury, mentioned the many meetings she attended before the legislation passed and discussed the benefits of the legislation.

The amendment and corresponding legislation will ease the process of working on state land in the Adirondack Park, according to Little. Road repair, bicycle-path building and other individual projects would be simplified, saving politicians time and taxpayers money.

Typically, these different projects would require individual amendments to the state constitution — a task that can take years for approval.

"It's expensive to do," Little said.

Franklin County Assemblyman Billy Jones, D-Chateaugay, also voiced his concern for the extensive time it took to get things done.

“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,” Jones said in a press release.

Article 14 of the constitution would be amended *“allowing public utility lines and bicycle paths on certain state lands in the forest preserve and establishing a forest preserve land bank for public projects.”*

With the new law, bike paths can be built near highways, instead of on them, for the safety of bikers. Little expressed concern for the lack of space bikers have on the road and said she hopes this will provide a safer alternative.

The law will also allow for the construction of utility lines buried or co-located within the widths of the highway, according to the amendment. The amendment limits utility lines to electric, telephone, broadband, water and sewer lines.

The amendment would also allow for the implementation of stabilization devices for existing telephone poles that are within the proximity of a highway.

In order to protect the surrounding wildlife, each project will be scrutinized by the DEC for ways to minimize the construction size as well as its impact on surrounding wildlife. The DEC will have the power to approve each project. Certain limitations were placed in the legislation to limit the size of construction of each project.

Construction on a stretch of highway can be no longer than a quarter linear mile, anything more would require legislation. Regardless of legislation, no project can use more than one mile of highway.

Also, no individual project can use more than 5 acres without additional legislation. Similarly, towns and counties cannot use more than 10 or 15 acres, respectively, without further legislation.

The amendment also limits the permitted space of construction on each side of the highway to three rods (16.5 yards).

The public will also have a chance to voice their opinions at a public, non-judiciary hearing. This would occur toward the end of the process, according to Jones's office.

Voters in the state will be asked to approve the proposed amendment on Election Day in November.