

Editorial: Adirondack land bank referendum good for New York

The Daily Gazette

July 9, 2017



The Adirondack Forest Preserve would be enhanced by the creation of a 250-acre land bank. Photographer: Miles Reed

New York state residents will have a chance to make government more efficient, protect the environment and improve infrastructure and communications in the Adirondacks and Catskills — all by filling in a little circle with a pen on [November's election ballot](#).

As one of their last acts of the 2017 session, lawmakers authorized a public vote on a constitutional amendment to create a 250-acre land bank for the Adirondack and Catskill parks.

By voting yes, voters will make it easier for communities to make infrastructure improvements in the most sensitive areas of the parks while ensuring the preservation of state land.

Under the current law, each time a community wants to smooth out a dangerous curve on a road or a bridge, build a safe bike path near a highway, put up equipment to expand the coverage of broadband communication, drill a well on public land or install sewer lines in the environmentally protected

Forest Preserve, someone has to propose an amendment to the state constitution in order for the action to move forward.

In exchange for doing work on one piece of land in the Forest Preserve, the law requires the state to swap that piece of property with another piece of land, which is then set aside for preservation, thereby ensuring the perpetuation of forever-wild land.

Many of these projects are designed to improve public safety and quality of life. Bike paths shouldn't be on highways; they should be safely off to the side. Evening out curves on roads and on approaches to bridges will lessen the chance of accidents. Culverts help prevent flooding and damage to nearby property. Expanded broadband access helps in both emergency communication and economic development.

But for each such project, the law requires that the state constitution be amended.

The amendment process requires approval by two successive state Legislatures and a public vote, which can stretch the approval process out over a minimum of two or three years, often longer.

Under this legislation, that process would be streamlined with the creation of a land bank.

Under strict guidelines to protect the environment — such as limiting the size of new projects and weighing their impact on surrounding wildlife — these small but necessary projects could go forward without a separate constitutional amendment for each.

To fulfill the requirement that developed land be swapped for some undeveloped land, the project developers will just tap into the 250 acres set aside in the land bank. As the 250 acres are used, the project sponsors will be required to pay into a Forest Preserve expansion account, with the money being used to purchase additional land in the Forest Preserve.

To ensure that the projects themselves meet environmental standards, the state Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) would have approval authority over each project.

This whole new process will significantly reduce the time and expense needed for simple but necessary improvements.

What's even more remarkable than the legislation itself is how various groups in the two parks, often which have competing agendas, came together to formulate the legislation over the last few months.

Among those that participated in the development of the bill were local-government organizations like the Adirondack Local Government Review Board and the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages; environmental groups like the Adirondack Council, The Adirondack Mountain Club, Protect the Adirondacks! Adirondack Wild, the Nature Conservancy, Adirondack Common Ground Alliance, the Citizens Campaign for the Environment, the Catskill Center for Conservation and Design, Environmental Advocates, Scenic Hudson, the Catskill Mountainkeeper and the New York League of Conservation Voters; the state DEC; and state lawmakers like Sen. Betty Little and Assemblyman Dan Stec.

These aren't groups and individuals that always see eye-to-eye, particularly on issues that pit any kind of infringement in the Forest Preserve against the environment.

This will make the park safer and more enjoyable, it will protect the Adirondack and Catskill experience, and it will save taxpayers time and money through greater efficiency of the approval process.

We'll remind you again about this referendum come election time. But if you're making your voting preferences early, consider voting yes when you see this amendment on the November ballot.