

Adirondack groups lobby for more park protections

By Gwendolyn Craig
Adirondack Explorer

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Willie Janeway of the Adirondack Council discusses park lobbying efforts in Albany on Monday as representatives of other groups look on. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig

ALBANY — A contingent of Adirondack Park supporters swept the Capitol on Monday, calling for more forest rangers, more funding to protect the area from overuse, bolstering of the Adirondack Park Agency and strengthening laws to protect Adirondack waters.

It has been at least a decade since a group of this size representing the Adirondacks got together for one lobbying day, said David Gibson, of Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve.

“It’s unusual, and we hope to do it more often,” Gibson added.

The day was spearheaded by Gibson's group along with the Adirondack Council, Adirondack Mountain Club, Protect the Adirondacks and the Sierra Club's Atlantic Chapter.

Some of the lobbyists' goals are to encourage lawmakers to change the draft 2021 budget for New York State. For example, no new forest rangers are listed in the state Department of Environmental Conservation's proposal to add 47 new staffers. The groups want more rangers.

The groups also discussed wishes for the state's \$300 million Environmental Protection Fund.

While glad to see that money in the draft budget, Gibson said the part of that fund going toward land easements and purchases has been cut by \$3 million. Lobbyists will ask for it to be restored to \$33 million.

Environmental groups are also worried about language in the budget that could use those Environmental Protection Fund dollars to pay for DEC staff.

"That's a horrible precedent," said Michael Barrett, executive director of the Adirondack Mountain Club, adding that it would undermine the whole purpose of the fund and was not a good way to balance the budget.

The groups are also asking for more specifics on Gov. Andrew Cuomo's proposed \$3 billion Restore Mother Nature Bond Act. Barrett said the Act is a "big, shiny object," but not enough information has been released about it. Lobbyists will ask for some specific projects to be listed in the act, which will need to be approved by voters in November.

Of concern to all the groups, too, is the future of the Adirondack Park Agency.

Peter Bauer, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks, noted that the 11-member board has three vacancies. Four of the board members are serving on expired terms, and another's term is set to expire in June.

Bauer and others are calling on lawmakers and Cuomo to get the board back up to full strength and appoint board members with "greater professional experience." One of the complaints of a number of the environmental groups is a lack of environmental attorneys, scientists and regional planning experts on the agency board.

The environmental groups have submitted about a dozen names of people willing to serve on the board, Gibson said.

Lobbyists are also hoping to garner more support for legislation that would reduce road salt use and protect waters in the Adirondacks and across the state. Willie Janeway, executive director of the Adirondack Council, also said he wants to see aquatic invasive species legislation strengthened.

Assemblyman Steve Englebright, D-Setauket, made an appearance at the start of the lobbying day, encouraging attendees "to protect a legacy that's important to our state." Englebright is also the chair of the state Assembly's Environmental Conservation Committee.

"We have work to do," Englebright said.