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State Officials Weigh In on Plan to Close Knox Farm

by Jeremy Morlock

In the past week, several New York State officials have weighed in on plans to close Knox Farm State Park at the end of the year. State Senator Dale M. Volker and State Assemblywoman Jane Corwin, Republicans whose districts include the Town of Aurora, vowed that they would fight the planned closure.

"Even at a time of unprecedented economic hardship, we cannot afford to ignore this unique facility that is home to community soccer clubs, equestrian events, hiking, cross country skiing, and nature walks," Volker said in a news release on Nov. 23. "This 633-acre state facility is simply an incredible state asset that needs to remain open.

"Moreover, this underhanded and unjust closing of Knox Farm is a symbol of the current leadership's fiscal incompetence and inability to fulfill its most basic duties as a government; balancing the budget and serving taxpayers with dignity and due diligence."



A photo of Knox Farm last week.

Speaking to reporters in Buffalo that same day, Governor David Paterson seemed unlikely to order a change of plans.

"We're doing it because we have to and when people object to it you never hear them saying where they would replace the resources that we have to use," cable news station YNN reported Paterson as saying. "That's why it's so difficult to govern at this period of time."

Paterson has blamed the planned layoffs of nearly 900 workers statewide on public-employee unions. The unions did not agree to re-open contracts for reductions that Paterson said would have closed the state's budget gap.

East Aurora Mayor Allan Kasprzak said that the governor's assessment of the situation misses the mark; had the state offered more notice of the park's closing, there would have been more time for an exchange of ideas on ways to keep it open, Kasprzak told the Advertiser. As it is, Kasprzak said that he's been contacted by several volunteer groups interested in keeping the park in operation.

On Friday, Kasprzak toured the park with Republican State Senator-elect Patrick Gallivan (who will replace Volker), Democratic State Assemblyman Sam Hoyt (whose district includes Grand Island and portions of Buffalo), and Seymour Knox IV (whose family sold New York State the land for the park). Later this week, elected state and local officials plan to meet for a discussion of the matter.

At this point, Kasprzak said that the elected representatives are working to pinpoint the expenses involved in operating the property. "We need to find out exactly what the budget is here" in order to explore viable alternatives, he stated.

One option the Kasprzak would like to discuss is a public-private partnership similar to the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy's maintenance of public parks in the City of Buffalo. Kasprzak is also talking about local ownership of the site. "If the state doesn't want it, then give it over," he said.

The news that the park was again slated for closure came just days after the advocacy organization Parks & Trails New York honored the Friends of Knox Farm State Park with the George W. Perkins Award for heroic park leadership. Parks & Trails New York cited the Friends' efforts earlier this year to keep the facility open.

"Friends of Knox Farm State Park provides a voice for the park's unique and diverse assets, which comprise a variety of habitats, such as pastures, hayfields, woodlands, and wetlands, as well as bicycling and horseback riding trails, near Buffalo in Erie County," a news release about the award stated.

In addition to its scenic areas and trails, the park also hosts interpretive programs through the Buffalo Audubon Society, fiber-making classes and an annual fiber festival, and activities by the East Aurora Driving Society. The Neil & Barbara Chur Family Equestrian Center, located in Knox Farm State Park at the corner of Knox Road and Gypsy Lane, was dedicated in September by state and local officials.