

St. Lawrence County four-wheeler enthusiasts disappointed state didn't approve registrations for newer larger machines

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By CRAIG FREILCH

St. Lawrence County four-wheeler riders are disappointed the state didn't approve a bill to allow registration of the newer, larger machines and some question whether Assemblywoman Addie Russell really wants the legislation.

Local advocates, such as Parishville Area ATV Club President Art Wilson and St. Lawrence County Trail Coordinator Deb Christy, believed that approval of registrations of off-road vehicles up to 1,500 pounds was within their grasp this year.

But lobbying by members of environmental groups, who said they were afraid the vehicles would be noisy, polluting, and would degrade trails in remote areas, prevailed in the Assembly, ultimately defeating a measure put forward by Russell. The Democratic assemblywoman from Theresa represents much of northern St. Lawrence County.

New York allows registration of all-terrain vehicles of up to 1,000 pounds, but is the only state in the nation that does not allow registration of off-road Utility Task Vehicles (UTVs) that weigh more than that. Until that happens owners of the larger machines can't legally operate them on anything but their own property or on property they have direct permission to use.

"It's very frustrating to see another legislative session go by without the passage of the UTV bill to allow registration of UTVs," said Wilson, particularly since the Senate passed a measure sponsored by Sen. Patty Ritchie (R-Heuvelton) for the fourth year in a row.

But Russell's Assembly bill remained stuck in committee.

"There is a tremendous amount of opposition to the use of ATVs and UTVs in general," coming from environmental groups such as the Adirondack Council, the Adirondack Mountain Club, and the Natural Resources Defense Council, said Russell.

"There have been several bills in the state Legislature to increase the weight limit so they can be registered and legally driven on trails," she added.

"Many of the environmental groups removed their objection to the weight limit," Russell said, when she tried to accommodate "their desire to protect the forest preserves and other environmentally sensitive spots," but she maintains there was no provision that would have prohibited the machines from entering the Adirondack or Catskill preserves.

But local UTV advocates didn't see it that way.

Trails coordinator Deb Christy said she heard the language would "prohibit the use of ATVs by the general public in the Adirondack Park, except for emergencies."

She said she was at a meeting with county Trail Advisory Board member and county legislator Tony Arquiett and Legislature Chair Jon Putney when they heard of the changes.

"Addie felt she had to submit the reworded bill, but we felt we would literally be giving up the park. A third of our trails are inside the park." They dropped their support for Russell's effort.

"In the end I removed the amendment because there was no deal to move forward," Russell said. "That's as far as it got."

"The benefit is that there is now dialog with these groups that kept the bills in the Transportation Committee" where there was little discussion before, Russell said. "But it was too fast for everyone on both sides that late in the session" to work out a compromise.

Wilson said he believes Russell is in league with those who do not want to see such a measure passed.

"Assemblywoman Russell pretends to be working to get this bill enacted, but in my opinion she is also working behind the scenes with the environmental groups to either stop the bill from being passed or at the very least, make sure that it is watered down enough to appease her supporters in the Adirondack Council."

Russell says she intends to try again, and so does Christy.

"Now we have the benefit of time, and a chance to keep moving forward instead of standing still," Russell said. "I hope we can agree before we head back to Albany. It's an opportunity not just to get the increase in weight but to get parity with what snowmobile clubs get" from state registration funds for trail maintenance.

Christy said she and other advocates of the off-road machines aren't wasting time.

"We're already getting materials together to promote this issue. We're not waiting for January" when members the Senate and Assembly return to Albany for the next session.

UTVs are also known and promoted as universal terrain vehicles, ROVs (recreational off-highway vehicles), utility vehicles, and side-by-sides, and they differ from ATVs in several ways.

ATVs are designed for one person only. UTVs are bigger and heavier, with room for a driver and one passenger and a bed for cargo or a seat in back for more passengers.

UTVs have steering wheels and ATVs have handlebars, and, according to the Recreational Off-Highway Vehicle Association (ROHVA), UTVs have seat belts and frames for protection of riders in a rollover.

Both types of machines come from manufacturers such as John Deere, Polaris, Yamaha, Kubota and Kawasaki.

In recent years, especially since the opening of the county's multi-use trail, a bill to permit registration of the larger machines has garnered the support of the county Legislature, town lawmakers, and various county officials. Senators Patty Ritchie of Heuvelton and Joe Griffo of Rome, who together represent most of the county, have sponsored bills in the Senate to pass registration.

Not only are the enjoyment – and votes -- of recreational users a factor, but there is the argument that the trails, the machines and their riders have the potential to generate millions of dollars in economic activity, from increased sales and maintenance of machines, fuel, insurance, groups spending money at restaurants and hotels, plus state revenue from the registration.

The upstate-Republican-dominated Senate has voted in favor of such legislation for years, and by its nature is more likely to support the point of view of counties in their districts trying to develop multi-use trails and build business. But passage in the downstate-Democrat-dominated Assembly has not happened.

Russell introduced a bill this year that supporters believed had a chance that of passage.

A more permissive bill by Assemblyman Ken Blankenbush (R-Black River), whose district includes southwestern St. Lawrence County, gained no traction in the Assembly.

Lobbying of legislators by Christy, Wilson and others began early in this year's session and didn't let up until the closing hours in mid-June. There had been frequent Albany meetings and there appeared to be genuine progress, Christy said.

Vehicle manufacturers and members of the national organization ROHVA also joined the six-month lobbying effort.

Early in June they were back in Albany with a selection of machines on the plaza "hoping that if they could see the actual machines they could see what they would be voting on. I think we did so well we inspired a response from the Adirondack Council and the Adirondack Mountain Club within days."

The Senate version of a registration bill passed easily.

Russell said her bill this year made it out of the Assembly transportation and codes committees, but not out of the Ways and Means Committee, which was to be the last stop before a floor vote.

As the session was coming to a close, "it was dying in Ways and Means, and I didn't want to squander the work, so I extended an olive branch to the environmental groups who were aggressively opposing it.