

Environmental groups fighting Sterling Forest casino

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October 14, 2014

Environmental groups are protesting the construction of a casino and resort within Sterling Forest because of its potentially harmful effects on the Ramapo River watershed and surrounding natural habitat.

The proposed Sterling Forest Resort, a project of the multi-billion dollar Malaysian-based Genting Group, would extend across 1.4 million square feet of land adjacent to Sterling Forest State Park in Orange County, raising concerns about its potential impact on the forest and in particular, the nearby Ramapo River, a major water supply for New York and New Jersey.

The New York Gaming Commission recently held a public hearing on the proposed resort, where groups such as the New Jersey Sierra Club voiced their concern about the project.

In addition to being the site of a major watershed that supplies millions of residents in southern New York and northern New Jersey, Sterling Forest State Park is also home to several threatened and endangered species of birds, including the Peregrine Falcon and Pied-Billed Grebe.

"This project undermines decades of investment to preserve open space and protect drinking water," said New Jersey Sierra Club Director Jeff Tittel. "A casino in this location will cause major environmental impacts, including increased traffic, flooding and pollution."

The casino is just one aspect of a larger integrated resort that, if approved, would feature 19 restaurants, a five-star hotel, a spa and outdoor attractions including zip-lining and skiing. Its developers estimate it would contribute \$4.6 billion in revenue over the next decade.

The developers — RW Orange County LLC, an affiliate of Genting Americas Inc. — say the location for Sterling was strategically chosen to attract a steady stream of clientele from New York City and northern New Jersey, creating a viable source of revenue that will compensate for the swath of recently shut-down Atlantic City casinos and contribute to economic development in the area.

The proposed site also encompasses the Sterling Renaissance Faire grounds and Tuxedo Ridge Ski Center, which resort developers plan to bring back into operation.

Members of the New Jersey Sierra Club note that the proposed site goes against the spirit of the law that originally enabled casinos to be a ballot question, which states that they must serve as a source of economic benefit for the community. Tuxedo Park, where the median income for a family of four exceeds \$120,000, would unlikely experience any sort of stimulus from casino activity, the project's opponents say.

Its location is also not easily accessible to public transportation, according to the New Jersey Sierra Club, and would create transportation issues for employees. As a remedy, resort developers have offered to provide shuttle service from surrounding areas, as well as constructing a new exit, 15B, off the Thruway to create a direct route to the resort and alleviate congestion. The exit proposal as it stands now has been denied by the Palisades Interstate Park Commission.

Additionally, the New Jersey Sierra Club says any economic benefit would be trumped by potentially harmful consequences for the environment, including the depletion of the quantity and quality of water in the Ramapo River due to increased pollution, stormwater runoff and sewage discharge.

However, Genting says the resort will meet the highest standards of sustainability with water reclamation facilities that will treat on-site water to be drinking-grade.

The Atlantic Chapter of the Sierra Club, which is headquartered in New York, conveyed its concerns to Environmental Protection Agency Regional Administrator Judith Enck in a letter written Sept. 24.

The letter states that Sterling Resort activity will exacerbate pre-existing aquatic resource problems in the Ramapo watershed and could compromise the quality of drinking water for close to two million residents in southern New York and northern New Jersey.

Sterling Forest State Park is a 21,935 acre park established in the Ramapo Mountains of New York in 1998. In addition to being an important watershed for the New York metropolitan area, it contains one of the largest bird conservation areas in the Highlands, which is home to several species of birds, including the endangered Peregrine Falcon.

According to Jurgen Wekerle, co-chair of Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter's Sterling Forest/Highlands Committee, the space proposed by Genting is entirely unfit to accommodate a

project of such magnitude. In a low-impact recreation site where the most rigorous activity is hiking, increased foot traffic from an estimated 8 million visitors a year would not only affect the water supply, it would also disrupt reproduction patterns of fauna specific to the Highlands region.

"The construction of the resort would be undermining the whole purpose of Sterling Forest, not to mention it would be squandering a public and private investment of close to \$120 million to protect the area," Wekerle said.

The project has raised a red flag among other environmental groups for another reason. The New Jersey Highlands Coalition, the Open Space Institute and the National Resources Defense Council all claim that Genting used their logos to endorse the project in its video proposal to the New York State Gaming Board without their consent.

When New Jersey Highlands Coalition Executive Director Julia Somers became aware of the logo's appearance in the developer's video presentation, she attributed it to a misunderstanding by Genting. "It all started when one of our funders was contacted by a Genting representative to hear a pitch on the project," Somers said. "We weren't going to deny them a chance to promote their idea, but there was also no way we were going to support it either. If anything, it only solidified our opposition."

Open Space Institute spokeswoman Eileen Larrabee has also denied any type of endorsement from her organization. "We've spent a lot of time over the last decade protecting the forest, and this project would go against that effort."

NRDC Project Attorney Daniel Raichel, who has been writing about the project in a blog, says a protected natural area such as Sterling Forest is the wrong place for a resort, no matter how environmentally-friendly Genting makes it. "We hope the New York Gaming Facilities Location Board will make the right decision by putting the public's interest and trust above financial interest and rejecting the project."

When asked about the use of the organizations' logos in their presentation, Genting Vice President of Corporate Communications Michael Levoff responded, "Throughout this bid process we have proactively engaged our supporters – and detractors – in a constructive dialogue to ensure that Sterling Forest Resort is both an unparalleled economic engine for New York state and an environmentally sensitive development. We have committed to construct a LEED Gold certified resort, treat our wastewater to potable standards and develop a new exit off the New York State Thruway. All of these initiatives were conceived with the help of various stakeholders, including many local environmental groups."