



No help on way for cash-strapped Fish and Game

By Terry Date , Staff writer
Eagle-Tribune

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Legislators who say the cash-strapped Fish and Game Department needs state dollars to continue its mission are searching for answers now that a variety of funding proposals appear to be on a boat to nowhere.

The governor included no money from the general fund for the department in his proposed budget, unveiled Feb. 15. House Bill 376, which would shift \$4.6 million a year in rooms and meals taxes from state coffers to Fish and Game doesn't have the Ways and Means Committee's stamp of approval. And other proposals, including saltwater fishing licenses and fees for kayaks and canoes, have received cool receptions.

One legislator has vowed a floor fight on behalf of the beleaguered department, seeking to raise the state's room and meals tax from 8 percent to 8.25 percent to support Fish and Game.

Rep. Dennis Vachon, D-Northwood, said he will introduce the amendment to HB 376 when it goes to the full House, likely March 7.

For Vachon's floor fight to succeed, the House would need to adopt the tax increase - which many members are reluctant to do - and overturn the Ways and Means recommendation.

Ways and Means Committee members voted 15-2 earlier this month not to recommend HB 376 to the entire House. Those in the majority, including Rep. Norman Major, R-Plaistow, said financial support for Fish and Game should come from the general operating budget, not from reapportioning a tax.

Vachon, also a Ways and Means Committee member, said the department should not have to spend its last reserve account dollar to stay afloat. Vachon said he is not afraid to take the heat for raising taxes for needed programs.

"I'm tired of government on the cheap," he said.

State Rep. Bob L'Heureux, R-Merrimack, a 17-year veteran of the Fish and Game Committee, said it's been estimated that Fish and Game programs are responsible for 7 percent of the rooms and meals taxes collected annually, money spent by wildlife watchers, hunters and fishermen in restaurants and hotels. The tax generated \$115 million in 2005.

L'Heureux said the Fish and Game Department has been largely self-funding, historically, but its mission has expanded while revenues have shrunk because fewer people are buying hunting and fishing licenses.

He wonders if there is a movement afoot to strip down the department rather than raise taxes.

"As soon as you have somebody mention a fee increase or a tax increase, all heck breaks loose (in the House)," he said. "You can't have it both ways."

While the governor included no general fund money for the department - it was seeking \$3.2 million over the next two years - the next stop for the biennial budget is the House Finance Committee, which will host public hearings next week. Fish and Game is asking its supporters to speak up in its behalf at the hearings.

Colin Manning, spokesman for Gov. John Lynch, said the governor's budget keeps Fish and Game in the black over the next two years without layoffs by not filling vacant jobs and reducing department expenses.

Manning also said the governor will continue to work with lawmakers and the department to ensure its mission continues.

Meanwhile, Finance Committee member Fred King, R-Colebrook, said that if Fish and Game is to continue non-game-related services such as search and rescue operations, it needs to be reimbursed from the general fund. If not, then the state needs to look at having other departments take over the non-game operations.

"There's no question that Fish and Game is in desperate straits," he said.

The state has raised nickels and dimes to support agency programs in the past, he said, but "it's not a nickel and dime operation; it's a dollar operation."

Bills supporting Fish and Game HB 376 would distribute a portion of meals and rooms tax revenues to the Fish and Game fund. The Ways and Means Committee voted 15-2 that the bill's inexpedient to legislate. HB 527 would establish a license for saltwater fishing. The proposal is being looked at in the Fish and Game Committee. LSR 1304 would charge a \$10 fee for decals to register canoes and kayaks.

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