

Adirondack Daily Enterprise

Lawmakers and more celebrate road salt law



Dan Kelting, head of the Adirondack Watershed Institute at Paul Smith's College, speaks about road salt at Berkeley Green in Saranac Lake Friday. (Enterprise photo — Aaron Cerbone)

SARANAC LAKE — State legislators gathered amid light snowfall in Berkeley Green Friday to take a victory lap on a road salt reduction bill they sponsored, which the governor signed Wednesday night.

Assemblyman Billy Jones, retiring state Sen. Betty Little and outgoing Assemblyman Dan Stec — elected a month ago to take Little's Senate seat — sponsored the Randy Preston Road Salt Reduction Act that Gov.

Andrew Cuomo signed into law this week. It will create an Adirondack Road Salt Reduction Task Force that Jones said will begin meeting in early 2021 to research and recommend alternatives to the road salt currently corrupting wells and natural waters.

“We’ve known for years and years and decades now the corrosive effects that salt has on our environment,” said Jones, D-Chateaugay Lake. *“We of course want to keep our roadways safe, and we will, but we need to do something to reduce salt and the effects that it has on our waterways and our residents.”*

Little, R-Queensbury, said this change will require compromise. She said some people want roads clean of ice and others want water clean of salt. Every solution brings its own problems.

“Everybody’s got to jump on board with this,” she said. *“You might be impacted, it might take you a little longer to get someplace, but if we’re keeping our lakes and rivers and streams clean, that is key for our economy and for our environment as well.”*



Michelle Preston speaks about her late husband Randy Preston at Berkeley Green in Saranac Lake on Friday, at a press conference celebrating the passing of a road salt bill named for him. (Enterprise photo — Aaron Cerbone)

Stec, R-Queensbury, said because there are competing interests in road safety and water safety, he is encouraged to see a diverse group of experts from several fields working to find a solution now.

“Everything in life, I think, eventually boils down to finding a balance,” Stec said. *“Government ... it’s a big ship. It takes a long time to turn sometimes. This may be an item that’s time is a little past due, but better late than never.”*

William Janeway, executive director of the Adirondack Council environmental advocacy group, said the bill made its way through the Legislature fast once it was there, and with bipartisan support. It was proposed around a year ago.

Jones said the 14-member task force will be made up of people from environmental groups, the state Department of Transportation, local government, health departments, highway department and scientists. It will submit recommendations by Sept. 1, 2021, which will be carried out in a three-year road salt application reduction pilot program.

Jones said while some Legislature task forces do not get much done, this will be a *“working task force.”*



State Assemblyman Billy Jones speaks about road salt legislation signed by the governor earlier this week. (Enterprise photo — Aaron Cerbone)

“This is very important, and it really is a momentous day,” Jones said. “This will make change in the Adirondacks.”

The bill is named after the late Wilmington town Supervisor Randy Preston, a political independent who died after a battle with cancer in July 2019. Preston was known for years as a strong advocate for limiting excess road salt use. He was the co-chair of the Adirondack Road Salt Working Group.

“None of this would have happened without a friend of all of us here. ... I know he’s probably looking down on us right now, making fun of my hair,” said Jones, who still had pink highlights visible in the sunlight from the dye used in his hair for breast cancer awareness in November. *“Randy, we got the job done.”*

Michelle Preston, Randy’s widow, said he would be *“so honored and so humbled”* to see the group celebrating the bill he fought for. She said he

never stopped working hard at it, even while battling a brain tumor.

“Thank you very much for not letting this die with him,” Michelle said.



Retiring state Sen. Betty Little speaks about road salt legislation signed by the governor earlier this week. (Enterprise photo — Aaron Cerbone)

Soon after she began her speech, her voice caught and she had to collect herself.

“I was fine until he made jokes about Randy,” Michelle said.

She said Jones was right, Randy would have been teasing the legislators and making jokes.

She said he loved the Adirondacks fiercely.

“We traveled all around the world,” she said. *“Everywhere that man would go, he would pull out his phone to show people, ‘This is where you need to go. This is the most beautiful place on earth.’”*



Outgoing state Assemblyman and state senator-elect Dan Stec speaks about road salt legislation signed by the governor earlier this week. (Enterprise photo — Aaron Cerbone)

Little said she was worried when the state Senate majority flipped from Republican to Democratic in the 2018 election, wondering if this push for road salt reduction would continue. She was glad Sen. Tim Kennedy, chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee who represents the Buffalo area, kept it up.

Little said this may be the last piece of legislation she sponsored that gets signed into law. She said she is glad it was signed by the governor before she left her nearly-25-year career in state politics.

“I was afraid that we wouldn’t get it signed,” Little said. “The governor had some issues with it, or the DOT had some issues with it, but I think we’ve resolved them.”

Little said the issue was “control.” She said legislators were emphatic that the bill should ensure that if a recommendation is made, the DOT follows through on it.

Jones thanked his staff for negotiating back and forth with the governor's office.

"Molly (Ryan) and my staff did an amazing job sticking to our guns and making sure we had everything we wanted in this legislation," Jones said.

Little said over the summer she has seen people coming from all over to enjoy the Adirondacks, despite a pandemic and events and venues being shut down. She said they come for *"beautiful scenery and clean water."*

Dan Kelting, executive director of the Adirondack Watershed Institute at Paul Smith's College, has studied the effects of road salt in the Adirondacks. He pointed out that the millions of tons of salt dumped on roads since 1980 is not there anymore; it runs off into the water and soil.

He referenced a 2019 study by AWI that found that of 500 Adirondacks wells tested, 64% of these downhill from state roads were found to have sodium levels exceeding the federally recommended health limit. Wells near local government roads, where less salt is used, showed less contamination, and wells far away from salted roads showed none.

Kelting, who lives in Saranac Lake, was excited that the state took up this research and is trying to solve this problem.

"Scientists rarely have the opportunity to see their work utilized in such a way to actually get to legislation," he said. *"To be able to say we actually have legislation now signed by the governor to deal with this significant issue is just a thrill of my life."*

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