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N.H. Off-Highway Vehicle Ass'n restructured to speak as one voice

By Edith Tucker
etucker@salmonpress.com

FRANCONIA NOTCH — OHRV enthusiasts from all over the state will now be able to speak with a one voice.

Representatives of most of the state's OHRV clubs met on Wednesday evening for the annual meeting of the New Hampshire Off-Highway Vehicle Association (NHOHVA) at Cannon Mountain headquarters, moderated by Tom Levesque of Derry, president of the Merrimack Valley Trail Riders.

The NHOHVA website describes the Association, established in July 2001 as "a statewide system which addresses the issues and opportunities facing people concerned with creating a positive future for trail motorcycles, ATV and off-highway vehicle recreation," including UTVs.

The formal meeting's agenda was topped by the Association considering whether it could best re-invigorate itself by welcoming the 15 ATV clubs in Coös County that make up the North Country OHRV Coalition. The Coalition drew statewide attention when Gov. Maggie Hassan was on hand to celebrate the Grand Opening of "Ride the Wilds: 1,000 miles of interconnected trails," on June 15 at Coleman State Park.

Both state Trails Bureau Chief Chris Gamache and Capt. John Wimsatt of Fish & Game, who oversees OHRV Enforcement and Education, emphasized that there were a number of thorny legislative issues that would come up in the 2014 session, many already being hammered out in study committees, in which it would be very important for the OHRV community to speak with a single voice.

After Gamache and Wimsatt left the room, Levesque explained that he believed that the NHOHVA was at a crucial decision point.

The Association, he said, could either be restructured to include clubs from all across the state plus a slate of newly elected officers or it could be disbanded. Levesque made it clear that that folding certainly was not his preferred option.

The enthusiasm and commitment of Association members has ebbed and flowed, he noted however, and right now the organization appears to be waning.

Although no one appeared ready to stand up and cheer, members from below the Notches, many longtime volunteers, agreed that the North Country clubs have to be involved if the state is to be brought together to operate as one unit. "It's like a marriage: we've got to make it work by the North and South working together," said Levesque.

Although Levesque momentarily considered a run for the presidency, in the end a single slate of officers was presented for the restructured Association: Harry Brown, president; Charlie Kurtz of Errol, vice president; Jennifer Landry of Pittsburg, secretary; Sean Matulonis of Hooksett, current treasurer who is about to become a first-time father, interim treasurer; and Bob Fitzhenry of Durham, director of public and government relations. Levesque and Jack Wheeler of Center Barnstead also agreed to serve on the executive committee.

All the 20-plus representatives of member clubs cast their votes for the entire slate and, then, one by one, using a variety of words, said that they hoped these changes would result in a reenergized and successful Association.

Brown explained that he planned to work together in the next 30 days with the other executive committee officers to come up with an Action Plan plus a revamped set of by-laws

to propose at a face-to-face meeting that will be called. The Association, a 501 (c)(4) nonprofit organization, will also need to assess its resources and come up with a budget. Brown said that he expects to seek the same kind of legislation that helps to make the state's snowmobile association financially sound with large club memberships. He explained that state law now provides financial incentives for snowmobilers to join in-state clubs and the clubs benefit. Brown said, "It's a win-win."

Other legislation will also be worked on, including very specific definitions of the different kinds of wheeled vehicles as well as greater clarity about the applicable rules on roads. Earlier in the evening, Gamache said that the ATV trail into Errol would not open until May 23, 2014. "The landowner has given permission but the trail, which has been worked on for four years, could be damaged by its being opened up too early," explained the Trails Bureau chief.

Two sections of the "Ride the Wilds" trail remain to be connected: Stratford to Colebrook, and Millsfield to Errol.

There is still confusion in the minds of many as to what rules apply to ATV operators who do not hold driver's licenses who are driving on state highways, Gamache admitted. Law enforcement will work together next month and in November.

Both he and Wimsatt said, "The safety of kids is paramount!"

A number of potential routes to connect Groveton to Stark to Milan in the middle of Coös County are being looked at, with surface roads being considered in Stark.

At this time, a southern east-west route is not being sought, Gamache said.

No problems have been reported on the Connecticut Lakes Headwaters' roads that were opened up to ATVs.

Gamache said that 2014 grant-in-aid funding would not include any new trails.

"Funds are maxed out for maintenance of existing trails and no major expansion in the North Country is planned, other than final connections," he said. "Registrations are up slightly, but not enough right now to handle major new projects."

In answer to a question as to how changes in the NHOHVA would affect "Ride the Wilds," Brown replied that it would remain a Coös County economic development initiative.

But, he noted, solid well-thought-out legislation designed to help OHRV clubs all across the state is bound to strengthen us all.