While a number of environmental groups rejoiced in the New York State Senate’s agreement with Gov. Andrew Cuomo to pass a five-year, $3 billion environmental bond act on Wednesday, the state’s budget director was more reserved about it on Thursday.

The Restore Mother Nature Bond Act, a part of the state budget’s transportation, economic development and environmental conservation bill, was passed by the Senate on Wednesday and the Assembly on Thursday. If the governor signs off, it will possibly go to a public vote in November.

Possibly.

A clause in the legislation allows Robert Mujica, the state budget director, to kill the bond act before it heads to a vote. With the state currently looking at a
$10 billion revenue shortfall between April and July, and the economy in a downward spiral amidst the coronavirus, the state is already looking to borrow funds to bridge the gap.

In response to a reporter’s question about the bond act during an Albany press conference on Thursday, Mujica said “access to the market is limited right now.”

By October, Mujica said “we will look at the state’s finances and look at our access to the market, then make a determination.”

According to the budget bill language, the bond act’s debt can be issued as long as it doesn’t adversely impact “funding available for (a) capital projects currently authorized that are deemed essential to the health and safety of the public, or (b) essential governmental services.”

The bill language also states “that if the act is not submitted to the people at the general election to be held in November 2020, this act shall expire and be deemed repealed.”

Cuomo didn’t offer any specific comment on the act on Thursday, but did tout the number of initiatives in the budget, calling it “an extraordinary feat of government accomplishment.”

“It would have been very easy to say, ‘Oh, this is an extraordinary year, let’s just do the bare minimum and go home,’” Cuomo said. “They (the state Legislature) said the opposite.”

Though state Sen. Betty Little, R-Queensbury, voted against the budget bills, she was in support of the $3 billion bond act. Little, and many other Republicans in both houses, voted against the budget bills because they believed there was too much policy involved.

Little said the bond act could be a tough sell, however, “if later this year the economy is in bad shape, people are out of work and the government is struggling to fund essentials such as health care and education.”

“There are a lot of good projects that would be funded through the Mother Nature Bond Act,” she said in an email to Adirondack Explorer. “Representing a region where local tax bases just can’t support expensive projects that improve our infrastructure, funding available through a bond act would make possible what otherwise wouldn’t be feasible. We saw this with the 1996 Environmental Bond Act. Given the tremendous financial challenges our government, as well as individuals, families and businesses, now face, making the case for more borrowing would seem difficult. A lot is going to depend on how long the pandemic persists, how resilient our economy proves to be, and whether or not federal aid is available to help our state and local governments deal with big budget holes.”
That’s why the New York Public Interest Research Group wants the fossil fuel industry to pay for the bond, and not the taxpayers.

“Polling has indicated the public strongly supports the fossil fuel industry paying for climate initiatives,” said Elizabeth Moran, environmental policy director of the group.

That being said, Moran added that the coronavirus could actually convince taxpayers the bond act is worthwhile. The pandemic, she said “has highlighted why environmental and public health protections are so important. Everyone needs access to clean water, always. That becomes so much more stark when we’re faced with a public health crisis like this.”

The governor alluded to similar thinking during his coronavirus press conference on April 1. Cuomo said as a society, people should start looking at how the pandemic is going to change the world and use lessons learned for crises ahead.

“Something like this will happen again,” Cuomo warned. “We’re seeing it in the environment. We’re seeing it with floods. We’re seeing it with hurricanes. Something like this will happen again.”

Adirondack Park environmental groups remained cautiously optimistic that the bond act would go to a public vote, even after Mujica’s comments on Thursday.

“Borrowing today for the long-term benefit of New York’s environment has made sense ... in the past and hopefully will still make sense to our leaders and the voters come November,” said David Gibson, managing partner of Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve. “The longer term payback from a dollar invested today in the state’s environmental quality is considerable.”

John Sheehan, communications director for the Adirondack Council, said he was “hopeful and optimistic at the moment.”

“We understand the need for a safety valve or escape clause in times of such financial uncertainty,” Sheehan wrote in an email. “But we are pleased to see how well environmental initiatives fared in the overall budget. We see that as recognition of the public’s desire to support environmental protection as a complement to public health protection.”

Peter Bauer said it was “heartening” that lawmakers have approved the bond act so far. The executive director of Protect the Adirondacks said the act “will help to mitigate some long-term impacts of climate change, which is also one of the immense challenges that we’re living through.”

Environmental advocates also praised lawmakers for fully funding the Environmental Protection Fund.
“New York’s leaders continued their commitment to land protection, stopping the spread of invasive species, pioneering solid waste management solutions and protecting our state lands,” Bauer said.

One concern environmental groups had about the fund was a possibility that state Department of Environmental Conservation staff could be paid out of the $300 million pot. In a news release, the Adirondack Council praised lawmakers for rejecting that possibility.

Specific environmental projects in Adirondack Park municipalities are also going to get funding.

Essex County will get $300,000 and Hamilton County will get $150,000 to help close their municipal landfills. The state will also devote $300,000 to visitor centers at Paul Smith College and Newcomb. Lake George was allocated $450,000 to combat invasive species. The Adirondack Diversity Initiative also received $250,000.

About $1.2 million out of the appropriation for state land stewardship will go specifically to addressing overuse in the Adirondack Forest Preserve in Essex County. Little said she was pleased to see that.

“That’s a tremendous, very much needed commitment by the state,” Little said.

The state budget, which was due April 1, is late. The state Senate passed all of its budget bills as of Thursday. The state Assembly had more to do as of 6 p.m. on Thursday.