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Master Plan moves toward review for fire-tower options

By KIMRAY BROOK — Commissioners at the Adirondack Park Agency this week revisited efforts to preserve fire towers on Hurricane and St. Regis mountains.

As Department of Environmental Conservation forest rangers finalized unit-management plans in March, under State Land Master Plan directive to take the towers down, public outcry urged redress.

"APA heard such a human cry that APA, as keepers of the (State Land Master Plan), have opened up review," said APA Commissioner James Townsend, chairman of the State Land Committee.

On Thursday, they approved a staff request to consult with the Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation experts, along with other state agencies, to vet three options.

THE CHOICES

One option would create a Historic zone under the towers, allowing Friends groups to restore and otherwise interpret the sites.

A second option would create a patch of Primitive land under the towers to permit some maintenance but no public access.

A third option would do nothing, which could trigger the original DEC mandate to take them down.

The final draft Environmental Impact Statement for any decision requires a 30-day comment period and a series of public hearings before final APA approval.

REVIEW REQUIRED

The Hurricane and St. Regis towers were tagged for removal 40 years ago when the Master Plan was first written.

The steel fire-observation towers were erected between 1918 and 1919. Though not used for fire protection now, both are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Hurricane tower is surrounded by 14,000 acres of state Primitive forestlands, entreated by the Master Plan to become a more restrictive Wilderness area should the tower come down.

St. Regis tower is in a Primitive canoe area.

APA staff planner James Connolly said any change in land use of the small parcels under the towers, from more restrictive to less, must go through State Environmental Quality Review Act process.

HISTORIC ASPECT

Since the towers are also listed on the Historic Register, their future must also abide by Historic Preservation guidelines.

"The state of New York considers these types of historic resources to be environmental resources," Connolly said.

"Part of the issue here is agency staff do not consider themselves historic experts.

"APA staff already have a fairly good idea that Historic Preservation officials favor some action to amend the Master Plan."

Commissioner Dick Booth suggested APA put a fourth option in motion to allow designation of special historic resources, thus preventing micro-management plans within unit-management plans.

Any historic designation comes with a price tag for restoration and interpretation that could approach \$50,000, "if not more," Connolly said, for each tower.

After the meeting, DEC Regional Forester Tom Martin said that cost estimate is about right.

DEC ROLE

DEC has assisted in preserving 34 fire towers still standing in the Adirondack Park, working with many Friends groups to foster Adopt a Natural Resource agreements to maintain them.

"These are long-term commitments. We've had friends groups come and go," Martin said. "Not a single fire tower has been reclaimed on state land without us being significantly involved."

After the meeting, environmentalists with Protect Adirondacks said any revision to the Master Plan should include hearings throughout the state.

"APA was handed success by DEC calling for support of the (Master Plan)," said Dan Plumley, the group's conservation director.

"The Master Plan looked at all these things in 1972."

Plumley and conservation specialist David Gibson consider Primitive and Canoe areas "essential wilderness."

"The idea of wilderness is not to attract people in large numbers to a destination point," Gibson said.

Both agreed the Master Plan is supposed to be a fluid, changing document, designed to grow with use over time.

But the final outcome, they said, seeks more wilderness — not less — to preserve places untrammelled by humans.

APA will file notice in the Environmental News Bulletin once the draft Environmental Impact Statement for land-use change options is complete.

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