

Hearing set for fire tower plan

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RAY BROOK - The state Adirondack Park Agency will hold a public hearing before determining how to preserve two mountaintop fire towers.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation released a draft unit management plan in October outlining the agency's proposal to restore and allow for full public access to the Hurricane Mountain Fire Tower Historic Area in the town of Keene and the St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower Historic Area in the town of Santa Clara.

Both have been closed to the public since they were discontinued for use as fire observation stations. The Hurricane Mountain tower was closed in 1979 and the St. Regis Mountain tower in 1990.

Article Photos



Hikers traverse the summit of St. Regis Mountain in March 2010, as seen through the base of the mountain's fire tower.

(Enterprise photo — Morgan Ryan)

Last week the APA passed a resolution to hold the hearing at 6 p.m. March 12 on whether DEC's draft UMP is in compliance with the State Land Master Plan. The resolution passed unanimously, but not without reservation.

"I'm going to vote for this, although I think it's foolish to spend public money to make these things available to people," said APA Commissioner Richard Booth. "The communication part of it, I understand. I guess if the state's going to spend money, we can also renovate it so people can go up."

Public comment on that topic will be open until March 26. The public comments will be presented to the APA board for a final decision at their April or May meeting.

The DEC initially proposed removing the towers, but after a public outcry, the APA board voted in October 2010 to classify the land beneath the two towers as historic, which allowed them to remain and be restored.

The DEC now wants to install interpretive materials in the cabs, like signs that would tell the history of the towers or images that identify the surrounding mountain peaks by name. The department also plans to put a radio repeater on the Hurricane tower, which would help close a gap in emergency radio coverage in the eastern High Peaks Wilderness, especially the Johns Brook valley, and portions of the Dix and Giant wilderness areas.

Steve Guglielmi from DEC outlined the state's proposed plan for the towers before the APA board passed the resolution. He said about 4,000 people visit St. Regis Mountain and about 7,000 people visit Hurricane Mountain annually.

The St. Regis Mountain UMP calls for rehabilitating the tower, while the Hurricane Mountain UMP includes rehabilitation and adding a side-mounted solar panel. The Hurricane UMP also calls for an additional six-car parking lot at the trailhead and the relocation of one of the trails on the mountain.

Guglielmi said the state historic preservation office OK'd the side-mounted solar panel that would be attached to the Hurricane Mountain tower.

So far there is no estimate on what the project would cost, but Guglielmi said the repairs needed are not extensive.

There was some confusion over how the project would be funded, though.

"There was a comment made the last time we heard about this that there was a fund used to restore the towers, and that seemed to be news to most of us, as far as a dedicated source of funds for the restoration of these towers," APA Chairwoman Leilani Crafts Ulrich said. "Is that something you know anything about, as far as the name of it?"

"I'm not that familiar with it," Guglielmi responded. "There are some comments in the public comment section in the UMPs that do address some of those questions. With the funding that the UMP gets through our (the DEC's) budget, some sources are dedicated to certain projects and some aren't. So depending on what these projects fall under, there may be some sources that are dedicated for fire towers, but we may not necessarily use those."

There was an item allocated for fire towers in Gov. George Pataki's last state budget. Guglielmi said volunteer groups could also be called on to help.

"There are volunteer groups ready to help with the rehab, but they're waiting on the UMP," Guglielmi said. "At this point we haven't been able to reach any formal agreement with them because we haven't had the unit management plan in place. Once we get through this

process, we'll be able to go to these groups and tell them, yes, we'll be able to take their assistance in rehabilitating the fire towers."