

'Long haul' for fire tower backers

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RAY BROOK - Supporters of preserving a pair of historic Adirondack mountaintop fire towers say their long battle is almost over.

The state Adirondack Park Agency board is expected to vote next month on a plan to upgrade, interpret and allow full public access to the Hurricane Mountain fire tower in the town of Keene and the St. Regis Mountain fire tower in the town of Santa Clara. If the agency approves the unit management plans for the two towers, it would mark the end of a more than 10-year effort to save the towers, which at one point had been slated for removal by the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

"Our group has hung in there all this time, and we want to see this done," said David Petrelli, co-chair of the Friends of St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower.

Article Photos



Friends of St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower co-chairs Dave Petrelli, left, and Doug Fitzgerald speak at a public hearing Wednesday at the state Adirondack Park Agency headquarters in Ray Brook.

(Enterprise photo — Chris Knight)

Petrelli said his group was first organized at Paul Smith's College in 2002.

"I can remember that because my wife was pregnant with our second daughter. That's how long we've been at this," he said. "It's always been two steps forward, one step back, because there have been ups and downs and opposition, but it feels good to be at this point."

Both towers have been closed to the public since they were discontinued for use as fire observation stations. The Hurricane Mountain tower, built in 1919, was closed in 1979. The St. Regis Mountain tower, built in 1918, was closed in 1990.

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. DEC has since drafted management plans for the two historic areas, and a public hearing on the plans was held Wednesday at the APA headquarters in Ray Brook.

The plans call for resuming maintenance of both towers to allow for full public access to the structures, which would require repairs to their stairs, cabs, windows and roofs. DEC also wants to install interpretive materials in the cabs, like signs that would tell the history of the towers.

APA planner Kathy Regan said the only major difference between the two UMPs is that a radio repeater powered by four solar panels would be side-mounted on the Hurricane tower. DEC officials have said the repeater would help close a gap in backcountry emergency radio coverage.

Regan said there's been some concern about the use of solar panels in a designated historic area.

"We have examples of solar panels on historic structures in wild forest," she said. "This would be the first time where we would have solar panels on a historic structure in an historic area. The State Land Master Plan compliance issue here will be addressed by the agency board."

During the public hearing, most of those who spoke voiced strong support for the plan to restore the towers and open them up to the public.

"Maintenance of fire towers enhances public enjoyment and understanding of the forest preserve and its history," said Doug Fitzgerald, co-chair of the St. Regis tower friends group, reading from a letter to the agency. He said his group would work with the state to restore, maintain and interpret the tower through a volunteer stewardship agreement.

Bill Ulinski, a member of the same group's steering committee, called the St. Regis tower "a great, unique classroom" for educating visitors and local residents about the Adirondack Park and its history.

The Friends of Hurricane Mountain Fire Tower is also ready to assist with restoration and stewardship of its namesake tower, said the group's Alta Jo Longware.

"We agree with the management objective to maximize the interpretive and educational potential of both the Hurricane and St. Regis towers as historic resources, while utilizing them for radio communications," Longware read from a prepared statement before adding, "This has been a long haul."

Of the half-dozen people who spoke Wednesday, only one questioned the move to classify the area around the towers as historic, even though that was decided more than three years ago.

"As we have stated in the past, the reclassification of this land as historic sets a precedent for spot zoning around non-conforming uses in the Forest Preserve that expressly contradict the State Land Master Plan," said Pine Roehrs of the Adirondack Council, an environmental group. "It is our hope that this tactic is not seen as a ready remedy for future classification dilemmas."

In the last few months, questions have also been raised by APA commissioners about whether the state would pay for the restoration of the towers. DEC officials have said some state funds could be used, but both towers' friends groups are also willing to cover some of the cost.

"There's really no concern we have about the funding," Petrelli said. He estimated restoring the St. Regis tower could cost from \$10,000 to \$15,000. "We've got close to 3,000 people who signed petitions. If even only a third of those people donate \$10, that's like \$10,000. Yes the costs can be considerable, and there's a good deal of work that needs to be done, but the big thing is we just need the OK to go forward."

The APA board is expected to consider approving the fire towers UMPs at its May meeting.

Petrelli said the restoration work could begin in late summer.