

APA opens door to preserving fire towers - The Adirondack Journal  
[By Jonathan Alexander](#)

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RAY BROOK — Adirondack Park Agency commissioners directed their staff this week to find a way to let the fire towers remain atop St. Regis and Hurricane mountains, provided that a source of money for their upkeep other than taxpayers can be secured.

Located on state-owned land and in areas designated Primitive and Canoe areas by the state Land Master Plan, both towers are considered non-conforming structures under the current draft of the plan.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation has penned proposals requiring the removal of the fire towers atop Hurricane and St. Regis mountains, and APA staff as late as last week expressed support for them to be taken down.

Leading area environmental groups have also lobbied for the fire towers to be dismantled, but local citizens have called for them to be retained.

During two recent public hearings, 33 citizens argued against their removal.

In light of the public's affinity for the federally recognized historic structures, APA commissioners including Dick Booth were apparently torn between the requirements of the Master Plan and the objective of preserving the fire towers as icons of the region's cultural history.

"The big part of me says, 'Look, this is a decision that was made decades ago when the SLMP was crafted and we should finish doing what has been left undone for a long time,'" Booth said. "But a part of me also says the towers are there, they are historic and although they have an impact on the wilderness character, it is certainly a bearable impact."

APA Commissioner Art Lussi sounded more resolute about saving the fire towers.

"We need to find a way to preserve them and there's no easy option," Lussi said. "We need to find an option to preserve the towers as they sit."

The Adirondack Local Government Review Board has petitioned the agency to find an alternative to their removal, but according to a staff report, every method of legally attaining this goal will be time consuming and complicated.

APA Commissioner Lani Ulrich stressed that doing things right supersedes doing things quickly.

"The number of years that it will take to get it right doesn't bother me," Ulrich said. "I don't like things taking forever, but I'd like to get it right."

APA Commissioners directed agency staff this week to determine the most legally viable choice of three options that would allow for the continued presence of the fire towers in their historic locations. Officials said each would have an impact on the SLMP itself, ranging from creating small historic parcels to an outright amendment that would make the towers conforming in Wilderness and Primitive areas.

Officials said each option is complex, but feasible.

Several APA Commissioners, including Booth, Ulrich and Cecil Wray, said they were wary of placing the maintenance costs of the towers on the shoulders of the taxpayers. They indicated that saving the towers is likely contingent on private citizen groups bankrolling the fire tower maintenance.

"What are we assuming goes on if we legitimize the towers being there and a corollary concern — who is paying for it?" Wray said.

Review Board Executive Director Fred Monroe said that like a cemetery, it is possible to create a dedicated maintenance fund for each of the towers.

Both towers have "friends" organizations that have verbally pledged to fund their upkeep. The Friends of the Bald Mountain Fire Tower has adopted the structure and covers all of the costs of keeping it open to the public.

The SLMP states the purpose of the state's Wilderness land designation is to provide an experience unadulterated by signs of human activity.

Like DEC, APA staff had concluded that there were few legally clean courses of action other than tearing down and relocating the towers.

APA Deputy Director of Planning Jim Connelly stressed that staff is limited to the requirements of the SLMP and not looking to pick fights with the local citizenry.

"We are fully aware of the historic value of the fire tower in the Adirondacks," Connelly said. "It's our job to make recommendations based on the State Land Master Plan."

APA staff are scheduled to present their legal considerations and cost analysis for fire tower preservation next month.