

APA votes to preserve towers

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The Hurricane Mountain fire tower. Photo by Phil Brown.

After years of debate and delay, the Adirondack Park Agency voted today to authorize the rehabilitation of dormant fire towers on St. Regis and Hurricane mountains.

The APA board voted 9-0 to reclassify a half-acre under each tower as a Historic Area—an action that critics denounced as “spot zoning,” warning that it sets a bad precedent.

The Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan had called for removing the towers, but in the face of a public outcry, the APA agreed to amend the master plan to allow the towers to stay.

The APA board expects that citizens groups will raise the money to fix up the steel structures. Board members also said the state Department of Environmental Conservation can remove the towers if they become a safety hazard or financial liability.

David Petrelli of the Friends of St. Regis was elated with the decision. “We have only a handful of these towers left,” he said, “and when one is taken down, it’s lost forever.”

“They’re landmarks; they’re part of our history,” said Melvin “Stub” Longware of the Friends of the Hurricane Fire Tower.

Assuming the governor signs off on the agency’s decision, DEC will draft management plans for the two Historic Areas. After that, the two friends groups will be able to begin work on fixing up the towers so they can be reopened to the public. DEC removed the lower steps from both towers years ago to make them inaccessible.

As recently as September, it seemed doubtful that the agency would allow the towers to be reopened to the public. At that month’s meeting, the APA staff recommended that the land under the towers be classified as Primitive. Under this scenario, APA staff said DEC would be authorized to do minimal maintenance to keep the towers intact but prohibited from restoring them for public use. When people on both sides objected to this solution, the staff changed its position.

Environmental organizations had argued that the APA should follow the State Land Master Plan and remove the towers. Acknowledging the towers’ cultural importance, they suggested that the structures be rebuilt in nearby hamlets and promoted as tourist attractions.

One tower is in the 13,500-acre Hurricane Mountain Primitive Area. It was only the tower’s presence that prevented the APA from originally classifying the region as Wilderness—which is defined in the State Land Master Plan as an area where “the imprint of man’s work is substantially unnoticeable.”

Despite acquiescing in the tower’s restoration, the APA board designated the rest of the tract as Wilderness. David Gibson of Adirondack Wild contends these twin decisions make a mockery of the Wilderness guidelines in the State Land Master Plan. “It’s clearly not compatible to have a five-story steel structure in the middle of a Wilderness Area,” he said.

The other tower is in the 18,200-acre St. Regis Canoe Area. Essentially, the Canoe Area is managed by the same guidelines as Wilderness. Thus, the tower had been considered a “non-conforming use” in the State Land Master Plan.

Because the towers were in violation of the master plan, the APA had to amend the document somehow to permit them to stay in place.

Neil Woodworth, executive director of the Adirondack Mountain Club, said he would have preferred that the agency classify the tower footprints as Primitive rather than Historic. He fears that people might cite this precedent as a rationale for permitting other structures to remain in Wilderness Areas and perhaps for reopening old roads in the Forest Preserve.

“Given the direction that some historic preservationists want to go, you could really change the wilderness character of the Park,” Woodworth said.

Woodworth said the towers could have been fixed up even if the summits had been classified as Primitive. "If they're going to stay, they ought to be maintained, and the public ought to be able to use them," he said.

His first choice, however, was to remove the towers. He noted that hikers can obtain great views from the summits without climbing the towers.

Brian Houseal, executive director of the Adirondack Council, also favored the removal of the towers, but he regards the issue as minor. "We're not going to challenge this decision," he said. "We have bigger fights."