
APA wants to keep fire towers

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Article Photos



The fire tower on Hurricane Mountain
(Enterprise photo — Mike Lynch)

RAY BROOK - While no final decision was made, the state Adirondack Park Agency reached a consensus Thursday to explore the legal steps necessary to keep the fire towers on Hurricane and St. Regis mountains in place.

"There's general sentiment to finding a path that allows both towers to remain," said Commissioner James Townsend, chairman of the agency's State Land Committee. "Degradation and removal are not options."

After conducting a recent study of Adirondack fire towers, the state Department of Environmental Conservation proposed removing the towers to comply with a mandate that's been in the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan since it was written in 1972. The plan requires removal of the two towers to bring the areas where they are located - the Hurricane Mountain Primitive Area and the St. Regis Canoe Area - into compliance with wilderness guidelines.

But that proposal has met with stiff public opposition, which APA staff and officials acknowledged Thursday.

"It's a very complicated issue and one that is very close to the hearts of many people," said APA Senior Natural Resources Planner Kevin Prickett, who outlined the agency's options Thursday. "Many people have come to see the towers as historic resources and want them preserved in their historic setting."

While the two towers are in disrepair and are no longer open to the public, both are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The agency waded into the issue after receiving a resolution from the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board that asked for an amendment to the master plan to let the fire towers remain. The Review Board requested APA and DEC reclassify the footprint of the lands around the towers and any associated structures as "historic areas" in the master plan.

Prickett gave the agency five options, each of which had its pros and cons when it came to compliance with the master plan.

Reclassifying the areas around the fire towers as historic would preserve the structures' historic resources, but "the quality of the wilderness or wilderness-type lands surrounding the fire towers would continue to be severely impacted," Prickett noted. If the towers were designated historic, they would have to be maintained and have their own unit management plans.

The second option, removing and relocating the towers, would satisfy the master plan's mandate, but the towers would be removed from their historical setting.

The third alternative is to do nothing and allow the fire towers to degrade. Prickett said that would lead to the loss of the towers' structural integrity and create safety hazards for the public, but improve each area's "naturalness."

The fourth option is to create a smaller primitive area for the Hurricane fire tower's footprint, classifying the surrounding area as wilderness, and reclassifying the St. Regis fire tower footprint as primitive. Prickett said that would allow the towers to remain, but the wilderness quality of surrounding state lands would be impacted.

Option five, revising the State Land Master Plan to allow fire towers in primitive and canoe areas, would preserve the fire towers and not conflict with the master plan, but it's the most complicated alternative. It would require four amendment actions, each of which would have to go through the State Environmental Quality Review process and public hearings, potentially taking years.

Commissioner Arthur Lussi said the agency should do what it can to keep the fire towers.

"I'm a person who has enjoyed taking my children up Hurricane, talking with them about the history of fire towers," he said. "We need to find a way to preserve them."

Commissioner Lani Ulrich questioned whether allowing the fire towers to remain would really impact someone's wilderness experience, although she said she didn't want to get into a "values debate."

Commissioner Richard Booth said he was "split" on the issue.

"A big part of me says this is a decision that was made decades ago when the State Land Master Plan was crafted and we'd be doing what's been left undone for a long time," he said. "But a part of me also says the towers are there, they're historic, and while they have an impact on the wilderness character, it's certainly a bearable impact."

If the towers remain, Booth added, the state shouldn't pay to maintain them since they're no longer necessary.

Agency Chairman Curt Stiles also said he was divided about the fate of the fire towers but pressed the board to go through the proper process and make a decision.

"The fact that this has gone on for as long as it has is what's part of the problem with what we do, and with what our friends in DEC do," he said. "We've been messing with this issue, deferring it and putting our head in the sand for a long time."

After listening to all the comments, Townsend asked agency staff to work with DEC officials and come back with a recommendation for an option that would allow the towers to stay. APA and DEC staff will also look into the cost of maintaining the towers.

The APA board could make a decision at its May meeting.

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