

DEC approves fire tower restoration plan

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Restoration of the fire towers atop St. Regis and Hurricane mountains is expected start next year.

State Department of Environmental Conservation Commissioner Joe Martens has approved the unit management plans for the Hurricane Mountain and St. Regis Mountain historic areas, the department confirmed today. In a press release, Martens said finishing the plans "allows us to move forward with restoring these historically significant resources and opening the fire towers to the public."

The DEC plans to work with two volunteer groups to restore the fire towers for full public access and include interpretive materials related to the towers' history.

Article Photos



The fire tower atop St. Regis Mountain in Paul Smiths was among the first eight built in the Adirondacks in 1910, and the state, used it for spotting wildfires until 1990, making it the longest operating fire observation station in New York.

(Enterprise file photo — Morgan Ryan)

"DEC's primary objective for these towers is to help the public gain a better understanding of the role fire towers played in protecting New York's natural resources," DEC Region 5 spokesman David Winchell said in an email. "As such, they are more valuable in a restored condition rather than being dismantled."

The state closed 62 of its 103 operational fire towers in 1971. Others followed, including the one on Hurricane Mountain, which was formally closed in 1979. The St. Regis Mountain tower wasn't closed until 1990, making it the longest operating fire observation station in the state.

Since then, a lack of maintenance took its toll as state agencies and the public debated what to do with the towers. The defunct structures became unsafe and were closed to the public. Some environmentalists argued that the towers should be taken down because they were non-conforming structures in areas managed as wilderness, while others said they have historical significance and should be restored.

To bring the Hurricane Mountain Primitive Area and St. Regis Canoe Area into compliance with the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, both fire towers were proposed for removal by the state Adirondack Park Agency in 2010.

Public comment periods were held for each tower, and the support to keep them prompted the APA to recommend classifying the land beneath each tower as a historic area under the SLMP.

Now that the unit management plans for this area approved, Winchell said the next steps include finalizing Volunteer Stewardship Agreements with the two groups that plan on helping with the restoration and maintenance of the towers: Friends of the St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower and Friends of the Hurricane Mountain Fire Tower.

"Work plans, budgets and funding must also be developed," Winchell wrote. "The purchase and transport of materials to the mountain tops and scheduling the work are the final steps in the process. We expect to begin work on both fire towers during the summer of 2015."

What work needs to be done on the towers? Winchell said the list includes replacing wooden steps and landings, patching concrete footings, replacing steel braces and bolts, installing safety fencing, replacing the roof on each tower's cab and painting the towers.

Just how much the effort will cost has yet to be determined, Winchell said. He said the two groups have pledged money and labor to complete the work.

Doug Fitzgerald, co-chair of the Friends of St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower, said his group had just written Martens a letter urging him to sign the UMP. He also said the group has submitted an application to be the volunteer steward organization to work with the DEC on the restoration.

If that application is approved, the group will take an active role in restoring the tower, with the ultimate goal of making it safe for public use. They will also focus on developing and installing interpretive signs that could, among other things, identify the surrounding mountains and explain the history of fire towers in the Adirondacks.

Fitzgerald said the educational component is an important part of restoring the structures.

"It's an important cultural landmark that needs to be preserved," Fitzgerald said. "Even though they're not a necessary component to protecting the Forest Preserve anymore, they were at one time, and I think that's an important story to tell people."

The St. Regis tower was among the first eight built in the Adirondacks in 1910 in response to two major wildfires that burned nearly a million acres in 1903 and 1908. The Hurricane Mountain tower was built in 1919.

Peter Slocum, a member of Friends of the Hurricane Mountain Fire Tower, said the group began to re-energize as the DEC approached the final steps toward approving the Hurricane Mountain UMP. He said they have similar goals to those of the St. Regis group.

"We're delighted to have more people getting involved now," Slocum said. "We have about a dozen people involved now, and as the restoration gets going next year, we'll have a lot more, I think."

Slocum said the history of the Hurricane tower is also important, and the possibility of posting a steward on the summit has been discussed.

First things first, though.

"My impression from previous conversations with DEC folks is they hope to undertake the construction next year and have it done by the end of the summer," Slocum said. "I don't know that that's their official plan yet, but we're hoping that will be the case, and that's exciting. We're delighted and eager to begin."

Senior Staff Writer Chris Knight contributed to this report.