

October 19, 2010

EDITORIAL: Fire towers should stay

Press-Republican

We're delighted to learn that those historic old fire towers on two mountain peaks in the Adirondacks will be allowed to stay. History there has at least as much value as environmental fidelity.

Two fire towers, one on Hurricane Mountain near Elizabethtown in Essex County and the other on St. Regis Mountain near Paul Smiths in Franklin County, have been subjects of dispute before the Adirondack Park Agency lately. Environmentalists wanted the APA to keep the area containing the towers in Primitive land classification, which would have doomed them in the interest of keeping the area true to its pristine character. Others wanted the agency to designate the land Historic, which would allow the restoration of the structures.

The APA voted last week for history.

In our view, the historic aspects of the Adirondacks, in this case, offset the urge to retain a pre-historic aura in the park.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the state was compelled to install dozens of fire towers throughout the Adirondacks after numerous large and expensive fires ravaged vast acreage in the Forest Preserve.

The "Great Fires" of 1903 and 1908, which consumed nearly 1 million acres of forest, provoked the state to establish an intricate and reliable network of fire districts with personnel to protect against raging fires and allay citizen concerns about the vulnerability of the unspoiled tracts.

Beginning in 1916, log structures began to give way to steel towers, manned by full-time forest rangers and fire observers — 57 towers, eventually, inside the park.

For 60 years, those towers were the state's fire security in the Adirondacks. But, as aerial firefighting techniques evolved, and the costs of staffing the towers increased, they were deactivated.

What remains of them now is a history lesson, as are the lighthouses on Lake Champlain. Their preservation should be encouraged, as any final vestiges of a bygone era should.

Where environmentalists see intrusion, we see a reminder of the character of the mountains a century ago. The towers, far from being an eyesore, stand gracefully as rare relics of a necessity in protecting that invaluable asset that is the Adirondacks.

Some critics argued that the APA Act forbade any retreat from strict wilderness enforcement. We see the agency's vote as affirmation that any law should be fluid to take into account newly emerged interests unforeseen upon enacting it.

The Adirondack wilderness can be appreciated in concert with very occasional glimpses at embryonic efforts to see to its security.

Opinions on how the park should be regulated through zoning vary widely. As with many rulings of any zoning agency, some people are going to applaud this one and some will be dismayed.

We think history can co-exist with nature in this context and the APA was wise in ruling so.