

4-14-10 -- APA staff: Fire towers should be torn down WNBZ

Despite scores of public comments opposing a proposal to tear down the fire towers atop Hurricane and St. Regis mountains, staff at the Adirondack Park Agency suggests that commissioners move ahead with the plan.

In an internal memo drafted by APA Assistant Director for Planning Richard Weber, staff acknowledges the hundreds of public comments opposing the towers' destruction, but indicates that the State Land Master Plan's definition of wilderness takes precedence.

"The removal of these two towers and the retention of 22 other towers in Wild Forest and private land areas may also be viewed as a balanced approach that minimizes adverse impacts to both the cultural resources and the wilderness resources of the Park," the memo states.

At two public hearings regarding the amendments to the Unit Management Plans of the Hurricane Mountain Primitive and St. Regis Canoe areas, about 90 percent of commenters wanted the towers left alone.

WNBZ has made several attempts to acquire the entire public comment record. But as of Tuesday, a Freedom of Information Law request filed last week has yet to garner a response from the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

Sources close to the story have indicated that like the public hearings, the majority of written comments are against the DEC proposal to remove the towers.

But DEC spokeswoman Lori Severino told WNBZ Tuesday that the department doesn't formally tabulate responses, instead focusing on the specifics of the comments.

"It's not like we tally the yays and nays" she said.

Both the Hurricane Mountain and St. Regis Mountain fire towers are on the National Register of Historic Places.

"Staff believe it is important to consider that while on the one hand, retention of the two towers at the existing summit locations could maximize the

protection of cultural resources, it would do so to the detriment of wilderness resources,” the memo reads.

Proponents of maintaining the towers atop the mountains consider the structures significant relics of the regions cultural history.

Environmentalists would like to see the towers removed, an effort backed by language in the SLMP, which specifically labels fire towers as non-conforming structures.

A recent DEC survey found there are 22 fire towers left on Adirondack state lands.

The Adirondack Local Government Review Board and citizens’ organizations lobbying for the towers’ existence have asked for a SLMP amendment that would classify the structures as historic.

But staff doesn’t believe reopening Pandora’s Box is a good idea.

“The act of revising the State Land Master Plan as proposed to include fire towers as conforming structures in primitive and canoe areas would conflict directly with the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement and could have far reaching and unforeseen consequences,” staff comments state. “These could include significant changes to the character of the Forest Preserve.”

Several sources within DEC have told WNBZ that there is an intra-departmental division between Albany brass and local foresters about the future of the towers.

They said that Region 5 foresters lobbied top DEC officials to leave the towers as they are, reminding Albany of the public relations nightmare that ensues when an Adirondack fire tower is threatened.

A local DEC official would not confirm or deny if there is dissent in the ranks over the issue.

But Severino said that she hasn’t heard of any division between Region 5 foresters and DEC brass.

Local residents have volunteered to assume the cost and labor of maintaining the towers if they remain atop the mountains.

APA Commissioners are not expected to make a decision this month

about the UMP amendments.

-Jon Alexander, 4-14-10