

WNBZ –AM - 1240 – SARANAC LAKE, NY – September 20, 2010

Diverse groups call APA fire tower proposal a 'cop-out'

Groups on both sides of the fire tower debate aren't pleased with a plan being championed by Adirondack Park Agency staff that could see them stay, at least until they decay even further.

Agency staff recommended Friday that commissioners adopt a plan that would allow the towers atop Hurricane and St. Regis mountains to stay where they sit, but also bans any future rehabilitation.

The plan would all but doom the towers at some point as they would have to be removed once the 90-year-old structures become unsafe.

Dan Plumley of Friends of the Forest Preserve says APA staff is just ducking the issue.

"For the most part, they are choosing the punt the question required by the state Land Master Plan to remove the towers, which has been on the table since 1973," he said. "They don't want to go there, which is too bad. So they end up suggesting a middle-of-the-road decision that doesn't get them to implement the requirements of the SLMP and doesn't make the people who want to restore the towers very happy."

Plumley – like many environmentalists – notes that the towers are in direct conflict with the State Land Master Plan. The plan would create postage stamp one-quarter acre Primitive areas around the base of each tower.

"If they allow dilapidated metal structures to be considered appropriate within a Wilderness area through spot zoning, how will they disallow the proposals for 400 foot wind towers on private land?" Plumley said.

Primitive areas are typically a step toward the Wilderness designation and contemplate the removal of non-conforming structures.

The proposal would allow the towers to stay where they now stand until such time they are deteriorated to a point where they pose a public hazard.

And like Plumley, Stub Longware of the Friends of the Hurricane Mountain Fire Tower doesn't think the APA proposal solves anything.

"I put it in writing that if they let the friends save it, I will personally see there is enough money to buy material only, no labor," he said.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation – which owns the towers – could

remove the towers at any time regardless of the APA's decision.

An alternative proposal could see the postage stamp land designated as historic instead of primitive. Under this plan, rehabilitation and public access would be permitted with either public or private funds. Friends groups have already begun fundraising drives for tower rehabilitation.

The two different proposals appeared to split the APA board.

Commissioner Lani Ulrich would like to see the private pro-tower groups at least have the opportunity to raise the funds to fix the withering structures.

"I think we have cut off the connection between the long term families and residents of the park with their love of their state land," she said. "They were very involved with the protection of that land and as we are kicking down these structures or letting them deteriorate and fall down, we're not doing them any good."

Some commissioners, like Bill Valentino, worry the historic designation would saddle DEC with another funding burden while the agency continues to experience ever-dwindling budgets.

"I think everyone would like to give the community an opportunity to give it a try. On the other hand, this is more than just putting pressure treated lumber," he said. "What I think is going to happen is there really isn't enough money to do this in this difficult time."

State regulators admit no engineering study has been performed to gauge the actual amount of work required to fix the towers. But DEC contends similar projects have run the state up to \$50,000 per tower.

The public comment record regarding the towers is weighted heavily toward keeping them where they currently stand.

Commissioners will address the fire tower issue further next month.

-Jon Alexander, 9-20-10