

APA finds four options for fire towers

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Staff planners at the Adirondack Park Agency have spelled out four options for fire towers on Hurricane and St. Regis mountains.

The first option reclassifies land under the towers as Historic Areas, allowing them to stay in place and be restored.

The second would revise the State Land Master Plan to allow a fire tower in the St. Regis Canoe Area, permitting the structure to be restored.

The third would revise the Master Plan to allow fire towers in Primitive Areas without restoring them.

The fourth choice — an option to "do nothing" — allows the Department of Environmental Conservation to take the fire towers down.

MORE HEARINGS

The fire towers were tagged for removal by DEC, a possibility that drew large public outcry at management-plan hearings this spring.

APA spokesman Keith McKeever said their Draft Environmental Impact Statement, indicating possible changes to the State Land Master Plan, now enters a similar public-comment period.

"We will hold three public hearings, and then we'll review all of the public comments, summarize them and bring a staff recommendation to the commissioners."

The final recommendation would be brought to the APA Board meeting in September at the earliest, but more likely in October.

PROTECTION

"Some of the alternatives proposed would make amendments to guidelines in the State Land Master Plan for canoe areas and primitive areas," McKeever said.

The Master Plan is the benchmark for APA decisions.

"The underlying principle of the State Land Master Plan and its protection of natural resources is paramount," McKeever said.

"Several decisions made by the Attorney General's Office in previous cases on the Forest Preserve

indicate, regardless of human advancement and recreational pursuit, protection of the Forest Preserve needs to be a priority."

FIFTH OPTION REJECTED

APA Environmental Planner James Connolly wrote the Draft Environmental Impact Statement, which says a fifth alternative considered designating fire towers as a conforming use in Wilderness.

"However, no fire towers exist on state lands classified as Wilderness within the Adirondack Park. No revisions to existing Wilderness guidelines are therefore being proposed or evaluated as part of this action."

REMOVAL ALLOWED

Both towers were built in the early 1900s.

St. Regis fire tower was decommissioned by DEC in 1990, and that agency closed the Hurricane Mountain fire tower in 1973.

But both are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Impact Statement says the State Historic Preservation Act of 1980 requires DEC to consult with the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation regarding anyplace named on the Historic Register

"With respect to fire towers in the Adirondacks, this consultation took the form of a (Historic Preservation Act) Letter of Resolution in 1994. This agreement commits the DEC to taking affirmative steps to facilitate the preservation of some historic fire towers but allows for the removal of towers from land units in which they are considered non-conforming by (the Master Plan.)"

The letter made provisions for the removal of eight fire towers and the relocation of four, provided DEC develop "a protective covenant to ensure that the historical or architectural aspects of the fire towers will be preserved and maintained."

TOWER STATUS

DEC has since completed a study for the Adirondack Park chronicling 57 fire towers originally built inside the Blue Line.

Of 34 still in existence, 20 are on State Forest land, 14 are on private or municipal property and 11 are restored or being restored. Three were moved to museums. Another eight towers are used for radio relay equipment.

And the towers on St. Regis and Hurricane are marked to be torn down.

'HISTORIC IMPORTANCE'

The APA Impact Statement also examines the definition of Wilderness modeled on federal law. In weighing concern about whether man-made objects conform to wild forest, the National Park Service ruled: "(Wilderness) does not have to have no imprint from human activities. A landscape can have hundreds of prehistoric and historic archeological sites on it and still appear to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature."

The "do nothing" alternative would result in the towers being taken down. But the impact statement says taking the towers down "will result in the elimination of a structure that is of historic importance to the community.

"This could be mitigated to a degree by rebuilding the tower within the community and making it easier for the public to access."

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