

Published April 04, 2010 09:16 pm - Department of Environmental Conservation stops work on Unit Management Plans pending review process.

Hurricane, St. Regis fire towers get APA Master Plan review

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KEENE — State forestlands with fire towers at St. Regis and Hurricane mountains are undergoing State Land Master Plan review.

Proposals to remove both fire towers drew concern at March hearings when DEC heard public comments on its forest management policy for St. Regis, Hurricane and Jay mountain units.

An overwhelming percentage of people who spoke urged keeping the historic fire towers.

DEC recommends removing the structures because they were tagged "non-conforming" in the Master Plan submitted to Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller in 1973.

Both fire towers had been in place for more than 50 years at the time.

Apparent flaws in Master Plan classification have been brought to the Adirondack Park Agency's attention.

The Local Government Review Board asked APA to consider reclassification, allowing historic designation for the towers.

The Review Board also asked DEC to delay further action on the towers until APA review is complete.

APA spokesman Keith McKeever confirmed last week the tower sites are under land-use classification review.

"We have a preliminary schedule to discuss various options regarding fire towers. There will be no further (DEC) action on the Unit Management Plans at this time."

Options will be brought to APA commissioners at the April APA meeting, McKeever said.

The Review Board, a coalition of Adirondack towns organized under the APA Act, wants to amend the Master Plan and questioned whether presupposition of "non-conforming" is legally binding and how it warrants removal of existing structures.

"If it requires removal of the towers, the Master Plan is wrong," Review Board Executive Director Fred Monroe said at the Keene public hearing in March.

"We would ask DEC not to take any further action to remove the towers until an amendment review process is done."

The St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower was placed on the National Historic Lookout Register in March 2005; the Hurricane Fire Tower was added to the National Register of Historic Places in June 2007.

There are other local concerns with Master Plan land-use classification.

Hurricane Primitive and Jay Wilderness forest units are being reviewed together by DEC, evidently under a long-held entreaty to conjoin the two once Hurricane fits wilderness criteria (minus the fire tower).

The ball was put in motion a long time ago.

The Master Plan says: "On the north this (Hurricane) area is separated from the Jay Wilderness Area by the Glen Road, a rough farm road not plowed in the winter. Should this road ever be closed or abandoned, all or a major portion of this area could be consolidated with the Jay Wilderness, depending on the status of the fire tower and phone lines."

Jay Wilderness is 7,951 acres and not big enough to meet the technical 10,000-acre definition for wilderness, said Mike Vilegi, a builder from Black Brook, at the public hearing.

The Glen Road is missing from the map.

"You don't even have the road that goes from the (Jay) Glen to Lewis (on the unit map)," Vilegi said.

The forest road forms part of the boundary between Jay and Hurricane forest.

The Master Plan also states, "If this (Hurricane) area alternately attains wilderness standards, this road should be closed at the state land boundary."

In presenting Hurricane and Jay unit plans, Robert Davey, the DEC forest ranger that inventoried them, said the road "may be a town road."

According to Jay Supervisor Randy Douglas and Highway Superintendent Chris Garrow, it is a town road, running about 3.94 miles in the Town of Jay crossing over Jay Mountain into the Town of Lewis.

Master Plan directive to close part of the road may run into precedent set in recent court decisions.

Jim McCulley challenged DEC's attempt to reclassify the Old Mountain Road in Keene and North Elba as forest preserve and won after a seven-year legal battle.

"Jay Mountain Road has never been abandoned by the towns," Douglas said.

"You can't have a road going through a wilderness," Vilegi said of any move to conjoin Hurricane and Jay state forest.

The DEC comment period on St. Regis, Hurricane and Jay units closed last week.

APA would have to undergo public hearings to formalize any change to the State Land Master Plan.

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