

Cost of fire tower restoration questioned

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RAY BROOK – The state may have to foot the bill to restore a pair of Adirondack fire towers unless groups that have pushed for their preservation can come up with the money.

That news, delivered at last week's state Adirondack Park Agency meeting, didn't sit well with a pair of APA commissioners. Richard Booth and Arthur Lussi said Thursday that they were under the impression that the state wasn't going to pay to fix up the St. Regis and Hurricane Mountain fire towers.

"When we discussed this several years ago, the arguments were that this is not going to cost the state money, or at least not much money, and that money will be raised to do whatever is necessary," Booth said. "This is a very different discussion than I remember having."

Other APA commissioners and state Department of Environmental Conservation officials countered that the cost of restoring the towers will be minimal, at \$10,000 to \$15,000 each, that the state has money set aside to do it and that the expense should not be a concern of the Park Agency.

DEC recently released draft unit management plans for the Hurricane Mountain Fire Tower Historic Area in the town of Keene and the St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower Area in the town of Santa Clara. The department wants to restore and allow for full public access to the structures.

Both have been closed to the public since they were discontinued for use as fire observation stations. The Hurricane Mountain tower was closed in 1979 and the St. Regis Mountain tower in 1990.

The towers had been slated for removal, but after a public outcry, the APA board voted in October 2010 to classify the land beneath the two towers as historic, which allowed them to remain and be restored.

DEC Associate Natural Resources Planner Josh Klague outlined the restoration plan for the towers at Thursday's APA meeting. The agency board would have to approve the plans for the two new historic areas, although that decision is still several months away.

"We are proposing to resume maintenance of both the towers to accommodate full public access of the cabs of both structures," Klague said. "This alternative would involve maintenance of pretty much every aspect of the tower, from the stairs to the structure itself to the cab, the windows and the roof."

DEC also wants to install interpretive materials in the cabs, like signs that would tell the history of the towers or images that identify the surrounding mountain peaks by name.

The department plans to put a radio repeater on the Hurricane tower. Klague said it would help close a gap in emergency radio coverage in the eastern High Peaks Wilderness, especially the Johns Brook valley, and portions of the Dix and Giant wilderness areas.

Booth asked for a "ballpark number" on restoring the towers for public access and if state money is involved.

"There will be state money involved," Klague said. "I can't give you a number on how much. It's likely that materials would have to be flown in. There's the cost of the materials themselves."

Asked by Commissioner Bill Thomas if any of the groups that fought for preservation of the towers have come forward to help fund their restoration, Klague said there are "viable sources."

“We haven’t finalized any agreements, but there are people who have expressed an interest that we will follow up on,” he said. “I don’t think we can rule out fundraising efforts, but I’m certain it will not be cost-free to the state.”

Like Booth, Lussi said he thought that when the board voted to reclassify the towers as historic three years ago, “our intention wasn’t to have the state spend money to maintain them and keep them going.

“This, to me, is a far cry from what we were contemplating,” Lussi said. “When I look at these kind of investments, it’s got to be pretty big numbers.”

DEC Regional Natural Resource Supervisor Tom Martin said past fire tower rehabilitation efforts have cost \$10,000 to \$15,000. He also said former Gov. George Pataki created a fund for fire tower restoration that still has a balance of \$150,000 to \$160,000.

“Because these are (DEC) facilities on (DEC) land, I think we have a legal and moral obligation to make sure they’re in a condition that’s safe for the public, so that if a private group can’t raise those funds, it’s our obligation to make sure those towers are safe for the public,” Martin said.

“If there are designated funds out there for restoration and maintenance of the fire towers, it’s a win, I think,” said agency Chairwoman Lani Ulrich.

Commissioner Sherman Craig said he didn’t think the finances of the projects are relevant to the discussion about whether the plans should be approved, but Booth continued to press the issue.

“From a public policy point of view, of all the things being done in this state that need money, reopening access to the top of fire towers on Adirondack mountains doesn’t strike me,” Booth said. “It’s one thing to preserve the towers, but to maintain the towers in a condition that the public can safely walk up and down them, that seems to me to be a very different kettle of fish.”

DEC's public comment period on the unit management plans came to a close on Friday. Final plans will eventually be presented to the agency, followed by a public hearing. A decision could come sometime early next year.

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