

Adirondack Park Agency backs two old fire towers

- By Stephen Williams Oct 16, 2010

The Adirondack Park Agency has recommended that the fire towers on Hurricane and St. Regis mountains be declared historic, allowing them to remain where they are — and be restored — in areas that would otherwise be classified as wilderness.

The agency board, meeting Thursday in Ray Brook, voted to recommend that the half-acre sites at the summit of each mountain where the towers are located be reclassified in the state land use master plan as “historic” rather than “wilderness” or “primitive.”

The recommendation will now go to the governor’s office for possible amendment to the Adirondack Park land use master plan and then to the state Department of Environmental Conservation for implementation.

A DEC plan for the future of all fire towers on state land last winter recommended their removal, sparking a public outcry that was expressed at three public hearings last summer.

“There certainly was overwhelming public support to maintain the towers,” said APA spokesman Keith McKeever.

The Hurricane Mountain tower is in a prominent spot overlooking Elizabethtown and the St. Regis Mountain tower is located northwest of Saranac Lake. Both towers were built in 1918-19 for fire spotting but are now long-closed and in disrepair.

A “historic” designation would allow the towers to be repaired and re-opened as destinations for hikers, though McKeever said separate DEC and APA approvals would be needed before any actual restoration could start.

Some wilderness advocates say the towers should be removed and they will continue to make their case to the governor’s office.

“We think there are very compelling arguments why they should be removed,” said David Gibson, a partner in Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve.

The fire towers aren’t compatible with the surrounding wilderness lands, he said, and they are in the middle of wilderness lands, not on their periphery like other historic-designated properties such as the Camp Santanoni great camp in Newcomb, the colonial fort at Crown Point and the John Brown farm in North Elba.

“It is clear to us that these are non-conforming structures in areas that are to be managed as wilderness,” Gibson said.

Adirondack Wild favors restoration of the 18 other Adirondack fire towers located on Wild Forest land, Gibson said. The group believes the Hurricane and St. Regis towers could be moved elsewhere and serve as educational exhibits.

Private groups are expected to raise money to try to restore the two fire towers if the final decision allows them to remain.

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