

Fire tower restoration price tag disputed

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Press-Republican

- Oct 14, 2010 Updated Nov 19, 2014

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Contention is brewing about what it would cost to restore mountain fire towers.

The Adirondack Park Agency will vote today whether to reclassify land as Historic under towers on St. Regis and Hurricane mountains, allowing for restoration.

But ultimately, it will be up to the Department of Environmental Conservation to generate agreements with Friends groups to reopen the towers, claiming they would have a shared fiscal responsibility since the towers are on state land.

In reports to the APA, DEC put the average price to restore towers at \$50,000.

But historic preservationists and fire-tower advocates say that is just not true.

'MISLEADING'

Steven Engelhart, executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, said there is no relevant data to back that figure up.

"There is simply no data, no past history, that supports this figure. Almost all of the previous fire-tower restoration work has been done by Friends organizations, and these projects are all in the \$5,000 to \$15,000 range, even with substantial replacement of steel, new windows, etc.

"Their (DEC) figure is inaccurate, misleading and only seems to serve their case for removal," Englehart said in an e-mail to the Press-Republican.

Documents from APA Staff Planner Kevin Prickett advise commissioners that restoration begins with a \$10,000 engineering fee.

"Again, a figure apparently taken right out of the blue," Englehart says.

"I'm not aware of a single paid engineering analysis for any of these towers. All previous engineering analysis has been done by the Albany DEC engineering unit, at no direct cost to the project. There is no indication that this wouldn't continue to be done."

CALLED OVERBLOWN

Englehart was not the only fire-tower advocate upset by projected restoration costs under review by the APA.

Bill Starr, state director of the Forest Fire Lookout Association, debunked the cost analysis with an assessment sent to him and the Press-Republican by DEC Historic Preservation Officer Charles Vandrei.

"I don't have hard numbers to go on, but my guess," Vandrei said in an e-mail, "given what has been accomplished with what little has been allocated to fire-tower restoration, is that (\$50,000 estimate) is overblown by something of a factor of 10.

"Even in cases where it has been necessary to replace steel, we have been able to do that with a combination of state funds and volunteer labor at a pretty reasonable cost."

LONG ISLAND EXAMPLE

Starr said the \$50,000 price tag is derived from a fire-tower project on Long Island, which involves buying a surplus tower, moving it, engineering a site and re-erecting it on the Quogue Wildlife Refuge, a process completely different from restoring towers in situ on Hurricane and St. Regis mountains.

"I find it rather disturbing that the DEC will intentionally mislead the APA Board by using this project to make their \$50,000 claim for the cost of restoring a fire tower that is in place," Starr said.

"Of course, this is not comparing apples to apples; APA and the DEC should be ashamed of themselves for using these misleading dollar figures in their report to the APA Board."

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Englehart advised Friends of Hurricane Mountain Fire Tower that costs to repair the fire tower on Poke-O-Moonshine several years ago landed between \$10,000 and \$15,000.

In September, APA commissioners asked staff to supply restoration-cost data for the October meeting.

They are expected to discuss the issue and rule on tower reclassifications today.

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