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APA says fire towers stay

By KIM SMITH DEDAM, Staff Writer

RAY BROOK — Fire towers on Hurricane and St. Regis will stay.

Nearly 10 years since orders were issued to unbolt them from mountaintops they've occupied for close to 100 years, the historic towers gained new foothold as cultural icons.

On Thursday, Adirondack Park Agency commissioners advised APA staff to explore options for new zoning that could amend or otherwise update the State Land Master Plan.

PUBLIC SUPPORT

Thirty years ago, the Master Plan mandated that the towers be taken down when the Department of Environmental Conservation stops using them for forest-fire observation. And DEC moved toward that goal in presenting unit-management plans last month.

But comments in two public hearings overwhelmingly favored keeping the towers in place.

The public message made its mark.

"Degradation and removal are not options," said Commissioner Jim Townsend, as 45 minutes of fire-tower discussion wrapped up in the State Land Committee meeting Thursday morning.

PRESERVATION

In discussing the plight of the two towers, it appeared the APA Board would not have had enough votes to go forward with taking the towers down.

"Why are we mandated to make this change?" asked Commissioner Arthur Lussi, saying he has enjoyed taking his children up Hurricane and talking about fire towers in the Adirondacks.

"We need to find a way to preserve them — preserve the towers where they sit."

ALTERNATIVES

Townsend and the APA Board sent staff back to the planning board to review three options:

- create a small historic district under each tower.
- Amend the Master Plan to make fire towers conforming structures.
- Retain a Primitive land-use classification to encompass the towers.

VOICE OF PEOPLE

Janice Hainer of Everybody's Market in Westport, helped her parents, Gretna and Melvin "Stubby" Longware, wage a public campaign to create Friends of Hurricane Mountain Fire Tower.

By this year, nearly 5,000 signatures urged DEC and APA to leave the tower alone and let them restore it.

Contacted after the meeting Thursday, Hainer was elated by the news.

"I have chills," she said. "This is so fantastic because it really means that the people that live up here — and who this tower means so much to — actually do have a voice in part of what is our heritage.

"That tower was the protectorate of the forest. It's the reason the forest is still there.

"This will mean so much to my mother (Mrs. Longware). Our grandfather used to sit us down on the porch, and he'd say, 'Look at that, look up there, you can see the raccoon. You can see him climbing the tower.' It's always been like a marker in the sky, an exclamation point on top of Hurricane."

'HALLELUJAH'

Reached by phone Thursday, Mrs. Longware shouted, "Yahoo! We won, hallelujah! It's been five years we worked on that. I am so happy.

"I tell you what I learned. You've got to stick to your guns and rally people.

"It was Marguerite Agnew (who) said, 'That's my Statue of Liberty. When I see it, I know I'm home.' And I think that's the way most people see it. It is ours."

The Elizabethtown benefactors have put \$5,000 aside in a bank to go toward material to restore it, Mr. Longware said.

Establishing a plan for interpretation and upkeep will ultimately become the responsibility of fire-tower friends groups.

Both Hurricane and St. Regis have such organizations waiting and ready to work to restore the sites.

Steve Engelhart, executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage spoke out at public hearings defending the fire towers' historic place in the Adirondacks.

Reached Thursday, he said he was "delighted that the Park Agency commissioners made what I consider a very enlightened decision and recognize cultural and historic resources have a place in the Forest Preserve and ... are acting in a way to ensure their preservation."

TOWERS FIT

APA Chairman Curt Stiles said APA must make a decision, one that could hold up in court, that either confirms the Master Plan or alters it.

"We've dragged our feet," Stiles said, noting that three governors have urged DEC to complete unit-management plans for Hurricane, Jay and St. Regis areas.

"I would urge us to move this process forward."

Fred Monroe, executive director of the Local Government Review Board, who asked APA to evaluate options to revise the Master Plan, said "the majority (of people) think these are compatible with wilderness."

After the meeting, Adirondack Council Executive Director Brian Houseal said they would not take issue or legal action to challenge APA's decision.

"The value we're talking about is largely scenic and has very little to do with degradation of natural beauty. The tower doesn't take away from your sense of being in the wilderness."

Houseal said APA should review national historic sites policy against unit-management planning and "reconcile any differences in those policies."

He suggested a complete inventory of Adirondack historic landmarks to avoid these types of issues in the future.

Next month, commissioners will likely review and ultimately vote on a process to include the fire towers in the Master Plan.