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Environmental groups slam trail widening

Snowmobile Assn. praises APA decision

BY KATHY BOWEN Gazette Reporter

Despite objections from environmental groups, the Adirondack Park Agency has approved a measure for wider grooming of snowmobile trails on state lands in the park.

The vote was 10-1 in favor of the changes in snowmobile trail guidelines that were supported by the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

Before the vote, the Adirondack Council, Adirondack Mountain Club and Protect the Adirondacks said the proposed guidelines were out of compliance with the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan and lobbied for a delay.

John Sheehan of the Adirondack Council said Monday that his group is considering a lawsuit on the grounds that the state Legislature adopted the master plan in 1987 and it alone has authority to change its provisions.

“No one is arguing that snowmobiles should be banned from the forest preserve, but the state law says trails are not to be expanded beyond what they were in 1987, and we believe the APA has overstepped its authority by making an administrative decision,” Sheehan said. “The snowmobile trails were approved to have essentially the same character as a foot trail. Allowing a 50 percent expansion of that footprint should not be allowed.”

DEC spokeswoman Lori Severino said guidelines proposed by her agency and revised by APA staff are believed to be in compliance with the master plan.

The New York State Snowmobile Association applauded the decision.

“Along with APA and DEC staff, representatives from the snowmobile community and environmental groups spent time walking trails during field trips,” said Dave Perkins, NYSSA trails coordinator. It was during those trips that solutions to issues were identified, according to Perkins. The guidelines also address the use of tracked groomers and off-season maintenance.

Perkins said tracked groomers are beneficial to the process of maintaining the trails because they can do a better job than groomers dragged behind snowmobiles.

Sheehan said the removal of trees and widening of the trails will lead to erosion and pollution problems that are not currently an issue in the forest preserve.

The change would allow the widening of trails by mechanical groomers to 9 feet on straight stretches and 12 feet in curves on what are being called community connectors along the state lands. Other trails will remain 8 feet wide.

Neil Woodworth, executive director of the Adirondack Mountain Club, said his group is looking at legal issues involved in the APA’s decision on Friday, but he doubts there will be any court filings in the matter.

“We’re concerned that the action taken was not an amendment to the state master plan, but we agree with the thrust of the decision,” he said.