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## Fire towers spark heated discussion

By KIM SMITH DEDAM, Staff Writer

KEENE — The Hurricane Mountain Fire Tower worked like a lightning rod at a recent public hearing, sparking impassioned debate.

As part of the Unit Management Plan review for Hurricane Primitive and Jay Wilderness areas — being drafted together — the Department of Environmental Conservation wants to take the tower down.

Some 15 of 21 people who spoke at the public hearing urged DEC to keep the tower and allow restoration.

### 'RUSTED MESS'

Two voices were ambivalent on the subject, saying the structure is in such a state of disrepair it would be dangerous should anyone attempt to climb it.

Retired DEC Forest Ranger Pete Fish, a Keene resident, climbed Hurricane Mountain last week.

"It's been abandoned, and it shows it," he said, calling the tower a "rusted mess."

"It probably ought to go."

### FRIENDS LOBBY

But a group called Friends of the Hurricane Tower, formed in September 1990 by Gretna and Melvin "Stubby" Longware of Elizabethtown, stand ready to restore and interpret the tower's long history.

The Longwares collected about 5,000 signatures in petitions from area residents, urging DEC to preserve the landmark fixture.

The passage of time has hampered their efforts to repair it.

"Five years ago, we started this campaign," Mrs. Longware said. "It shouldn't take anybody five years to make a decision."

Mr. Longware recalled several generations of his family that kept watch over the forests of Hurricane.

"Just seeing the tower up there is a reminder — fire — be careful. Fix it. We've got volunteers if they'll (DEC) let us."

Every preserved fire tower — and there are 22 in the Adirondack Park — relies on "friends" for upkeep and site interpretation.

Mrs. Longware asked DEC why their group was left out of DEC's fire-tower presentation at the hearing.

The group is listed in the Fire Tower Study, a 433-page document published by DEC last month.

Even though Hurricane Friends has been in existence for two decades, "we didn't have any authorization to do anything," Mrs. Longware said.

#### TARGETED IN 1972

Hurricane Tower removal was recommended as part of a master plan 38 years ago, leading many at the meeting to believe the move to scrap it is a "done deal."

The chunk of 13,784 forest acres around Hurricane was classified Primitive in the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan in 1972, with a caveat: that if the tower were removed, the land could be reclassified as Wilderness, a more restrictive land-use category.

That left many at the public hearing wondering which is non-conforming: the way Hurricane and Jay land was classified or the tower.

"Inconsistent? Non-conforming? Incompatible? Who says?" asked Steven Engelhart, executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage.

"To me, the most interesting part of the wilderness criteria — and this was conveniently left out of DEC's presentation — is that wilderness areas 'may also contain other features of scientific, educational, scenic or historical value.'

"Even within the language of the primitive/wilderness classification, it seems that there's room for this historic structure," Englehart said.

"DEC's wish to purify wilderness is backward thinking."

#### HISTORIC VALUE

Keene Town Historian Janet Hall said the Hurricane Tower should be designated a historic site.

In calls to the State Historic Preservation Office, Hall found the last time state historians weighed in on the tower was 20 years ago.

"They do not agree with removing the towers," she said.

"It is ours. It belongs to the people of Keene and Elizabethtown. You should not waste (state) funds tearing down our history."

The Hurricane Tower is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and Essex County supervisors passed a resolution saying it should remain in place.

#### GREEN SUPPORT

Leaning entirely on the definition of non-conforming use, three environmental groups called in unison for removal of the Hurricane Fire Tower.

Neil Woodworth, executive director of the Adirondack Mountain Club, said his group has supported retention of 22 of 24 Adirondack towers described in the DEC Tower Study.

"The Hurricane Tower does prevent the Hurricane area from ever becoming a Wilderness area," he said.

The Adirondack Council named three towers, Hurricane and St. Regis included, as out of compliance with the Master Plan.

John Davis, conservation director for the Adirondack Council, said their organization believes the Master Plan is law, much more than a body of regulatory guidelines.

But Black Brook Councilman Howard Aubin questioned whether the Master Plan trumps Article 14 in the State Constitution, which protects Wild Forest, not Wilderness, as "Forever Wild."

Dan Plumley, conservation director for Protect the Adirondacks, said that when the Master Plan was written "then we committed as a people to seeing nature undefiled. We are blessed that we have wilderness protected."

#### TIME TO COMMENT

DEC admitted the Hurricane Fire Tower is the highest-profile issue with the plan to date, with most of the public comments asking DEC to retain and restore the tower.

Rob Daley, the DEC forest ranger who drafted the plans, said the agency has been charged with making the "unit become more wild, not less wild."

He said they would have to request revision of the Master Plan to allow fire towers in Wilderness areas.

DEC is taking public comments on the Hurricane Primitive and Jay Wilderness Unit Management Plans until March 26.

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