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Snowmobile Plan Brings Renewed Calls for SLMP Amendments

Representatives from a diverse set of organizations and perspectives renewed their calls for the Adirondack Park Agency to reopen the State Land Master Plan for revision.

On Thursday, the APA State Land Committee endorsed a proposed snowmobile trail siting and management guide, with a four to one majority. And the single dissenter – Commissioner Dick Booth – didn't support the measure not because he doesn't agree with the plan, but because of a statutory requirement in the SLMP.

“And I raised the question as to whether we should amend the State Land Master Plan because I was uneasy about the details within this document and language within the State Land Master Plan regarding the requirement for the nature of a foot trail,” Booth said. “Reluctantly I have come to the conclusion that we have to have a specific amendment to the master plan before we can do this.”

The SLMP states that all snowmobile trails must – “maintain the essential character of a foot trail” – a provision that environmentalists and local governments both find problematic.

Adirondack Council executive director Brian Houseal said that his organization is in support of the proposed guidelines that would increase Department of Environmental Conservation oversight of snowmobile trail maintenance and siting practices.

But the language in the SLMP is a problem. Especially in regards to the footpath requirement and other language in the snowmobile plan.

“We believe that the guidance that has been provided is inconsistent with the State Land Master Plan with respect to the need for a definition of community connector trails, which are beyond the character of a foot path, the definition of administrative personnel and the use of motorized tracked groomers,” Houseal told WNBZ. “With that said, we commend do commend DEC and APA staff with all the good work that has come together here. We believe that if parties agreed to an amendment to the State Land Master Plan there would be agreement and a lot of positive feeling about that as well.”

The council has been critical of some aspects of the plan including a provision that would widen the larger trails and allow for tracked grooming equipment to be used inside the park's forest preserve.

And Houseal is not alone in the interpretation that there are SLMP issues at play in this case.

Adirondack Local Government Review Board Executive Director Fred Monroe agreed, stating that although the plan itself could go a long way in meeting the economic needs of towns in the heart of the Adirondacks, it also exposes the flawed and outdated nature of the SLMP.

“It’s just irrational to say that a snowmobile trail must have the character of a foot trail,” Monroe said. “Why don’t we say that a foot trail has to look like something else?”

But APA staffer Walter Linck has a very different interpretation.

“The State Land Master Plan defines a foot trail as providing reasonable access in a manner that causes the least effect on the surrounding environment,” he said. “That’s what we are doing here – providing reasonable access, while finding the least effect to the forest preserve.”

APA Chairman Curt Stiles said that the condition of a properly maintained snowmobile trail in the summer months may be the key to conformity.

“The standard may be better set by the character of a snowmobile trail, instead of a foot trail,” Stiles said. “If you look at a snowmobile trail in the spring or summer after the snow has melted, the trails are better.”

Adirondack Mountain Club Executive Director Neil Woodworth also feels that adopting the snowmobile trail guide without amending the SLMP would be a violation.

“We would have to look into it more if it passes tomorrow,” he said. “But there could be a lawsuit.”

The draft snowmobile trail-siting plan will be in front of the full agency board this morning.

If adopted, it would create two categories of trails – one composed of smaller “dead end” trails – and the other of those that connect towns throughout the park.

-Jon Alexander, 10-13-09