

Post Star
November 20, 2009

Snowmobile trail plan pits APA against some environmental groups

By DON LEHMAN

The Adirondack Park Agency passed a new plan this week that spells out how snowmobile trails can be maintained on state land, an action that has pleased snowmobile clubs but angered some environmental groups and prompted at least one threat of litigation.

The APA found that the plan was "consistent" with the Adirondack Park State Land Management Plan (SLMP).

The plan will allow some trails, dubbed "community connectors" because they typically connect population centers, to be widened to 9 feet in straightaways and 12 feet in curves, and also allow the use of self-propelled grooming machines on the trails. The New York State Snowmobile Association and at least one local snowmobile club were among those who praised it.

The Adirondack Council panned the plan, and the organization's spokesman, John Sheehan, said Thursday that a legal challenge to it was likely in the coming weeks.

Sheehan said that allowing trails to be widened by 50 percent in some cases violates the SLMP, which dictates that trails "have the character of a foot trail." He said the plan also allows "community connectors" deeper in the woods than they initially were planned.

He said the council will likely pursue a legal challenge of the decision in the coming weeks, since work to expand trails for this winter will occur this fall.

"If we want to stop the damage we're going to have to move quickly," he said.

The environmental group Protect the Adirondacks had also opposed the plan, while the Adirondack Mountain Club supported it but questioned whether it was consistent with the SLMP.

Neil Woodworth, ADK's executive director, said the organization does not believe the APA's actions were permitted under the SLMP, but said the agency does not plan a legal challenge.

"Our problem isn't what they did, but how they did it," Woodworth said. "This should result in better snowmobiling in the exterior (of forest lands) and better skiing and snowshoeing in the interior."

Under the plan, there should be more oversight over snowmobile clubs actions, Woodworth said.

Dave Perkins, the state snowmobile association's trails coordinator, said the agreement was the result of "years of work that brought stakeholders together to seek solutions to issues and concerns about snowmobile trails."

Mike Fazio, president of the South Warren Snowmobile Club, which runs an extensive trail system in Lake Luzerne, Lake George and Queensbury, much of it within the Adirondack Park, said the plan was a "give and take thing" that he generally supported.

"It takes away a lot of the gray area," Fazio said. "We know now what we can and can't do, even if we don't agree with all of it."

Fazio said the plan will allow the South Warren Snowmobile Club to continue grooming its trails in the Adirondack Park as it has been, using mechanical groomers.

The volunteer club is also doing extensive rehabilitation to its trail system in the West Mountain area of Queensbury in preparation for the upcoming season, Fazio said.

Snowmobiling is a major component of Warren County's winter tourism industry, and the South Warren trail system is to be profiled in an upcoming issue of SnowGoer magazine.