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Wider state snowmobile trails face fight

BY KATHY BOWEN Gazette Reporter

The Adirondack Council conservation group is opposing a state request that would allow for snowmobile trails on state-owned land to be widened.

The Department of Environmental Conservation plan is scheduled to be discussed by the Adirondack Park Agency today with a vote tentatively set for Friday. The APA is determining agency on such issues.

DEC spokeswoman Lori Severino said a set of guidelines proposed by the state in September has been revised by APA staff and it is believed the change in grooming policies is in compliance with the APA Master Plan, which includes allowances for snowmobiles on state land.

The Adirondack Council disagrees. Executive Director Brian Houseal said such a change “will lead to significant environmental degradation.”

“DEC has been the driving force behind this ill-considered effort to change the nature of snowmobiling in the Adirondack Park since 2001,” Houseal said. “While we agreed with many of the stated principles at the beginning of the process, DEC has changed directions in terms of its goals and how to get there numerous times, including this latest attempt to seek approval for activities that are currently prohibited.”

Currently, the master plan calls for snowmobile trails to be “essentially” foot trails that are groomed in the winter by snowmobiles dragging a device to pack down the snow.

The proposed change in the rules 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.

Houseal said the Adirondack Council endorses the concept of community connector trails, but mechanical groomers clearing the snow 9 feet wide is unacceptable.

DEC is also seeking the authority to permit private citizens, mostly in snowmobile clubs, who sign stewardship agreements to drive motor vehicles in the Forest Preserve.

“DEC should not be allowed to carry out these changes until the [master plan] has been amended,” Houseal said. “In 2004, DEC acknowledged that amending the master plan might be necessary to carry out its plan. Then in 2006, DEC had a change of heart and said it would not be needed.”

He said that under the current rules, trails can be built within 500 feet of an existing road corridor. The new plan allows them to be as far away as two miles.

“Almost all of the Adirondack Forest Preserve is within two miles of a road,” he said. The widening of the trails would allow for tree and stump removals and increased use of motorized vehicles in the preserve year-round.

“APA Commissioners must come to the logical decision that this guidance document does not pass muster,” Houseal said. “This misguided attempt at changing the rules for snowmobile trails has gone way off course.”

JD Downing is vice president of the Florida Snowmobile Club in Montgomery County.

He said improving trails benefits more than just the snowmobilers.

“Cross country skiers appreciate a nice trail too,” he said. “Wider, better groomed trails mean smoother, safer rides. Word of mouth spreads about good trails and there are businesses throughout the Adirondacks who count on the snowmobilers for economic survival in the wintertime.”

The proposed amendment to the guidelines also acknowledges the economic impact snowmobilers have in the Adirondack Park. It stresses the disturbances to the park are to be minimized.

The Adirondack Council describes itself as a not-for-profit environmental group that has been working since 1975 to protect the open-space resources of New York State’s 6-million-acre Adirondack Park. Based in the Adirondacks with a second office in Albany, the Adirondack Council has a staff of 15.