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Adirondack Council wants St. Lawrence County to revise multi-use trail plan

By MARTHA ELLEN, TIMES STAFF WRITER

The Adirondack Council wants St. Lawrence County to make major revisions to the environmental review it drafted for its proposed multi-use recreational trail system.

“This legally required study is far from being the in-depth environmental analysis we had expected from St. Lawrence County,” Adirondack Council Legislative Director Scott M. Lorey said in a statement. “The good news is that it is only a draft, so the authors can go back and fix the obvious flaws we have identified before issuing final permission for trail work to begin.”

The comment period for the draft Generic Environmental Impact Statement ended Wednesday. Part of the proposed trail system, which would link Lewis County to Franklin County, is within the Adirondack Park.

Among its criticisms, the conservation advocacy group said the review prepared by consultant Barton & Loguidice does not detail the harm expected to wildlife and plants, makes contradictory predictions about the fate of endangered Indiana bats, does not adequately address the role all-terrain vehicles play in spreading invasive species, provides no details about the cost of maintaining the trail system, has conflicting predictions about expected trail use, and generally treats the impact statement as a formality.

The Council, along with six Lewis County residents, successfully sued Lewis County in 2007 for failing to conduct a complete review of the environmental impact of its ATV trail system. The Council is prepared to sue St. Lawrence County if need be, Mr. Lorey said.

Barton and Loguidice referred questions to St. Lawrence County Highway Superintendent William E. Dashnaw, who did not return a call for comment.

Trails Advisory Board Secretary Dawn C. Howard said she could not address specific criticisms made by the Adirondack Council but that comments were welcome.

“All of the comments have to be looked at by the whole committee and the consultant,” she said. “It may or may not need to be revised.”

The Council agreed with parts of the impact statement, including the county’s efforts to avoid wetlands and water crossings.

It also found much to fault.

In the Council's comments, Allison Buckley, conservation director, noted that legal justification for opening roads to ATVs does not exist and that municipalities must first show that it is impossible for ATVs to otherwise gain access to adjacent trails.

The Council also thinks the proposed trail system serves the interests of ATV users at the expense of other recreational groups. The Council said it sees the proposal in part designed to justify already occurring illegal ATV use, which it does not believe will decrease.

"In fact, it is our experience that opening up additional areas for legal riding only provides more access to illegal riding," Ms. Buckley wrote. "Mostly, we are concerned with enforcement levels and further environmental degradation of both illegal and legal trails."