

North Country Now
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Environmentalists to call on Adirondack Park Agency to make ‘sweeping changes’ to land use rules in park

RAY BROOK -- An Adirondack Park environmental organization will call on the Adirondack Park Agency to make sweeping changes to its rules for private land use and development in the half-private/half-public park, when the agency holds its monthly meeting on Thursday.

“The bad news is that the current rules for development are too weak and outdated to protect the park’s pure waters, wildlife and unbroken forests,” said the Adirondack Council Executive Director Brian L. Houseal.

“These rules were created in 1971,” Houseal said. “Conservation science and smart growth principles have advanced a great deal over the past 40 years. Unfortunately, the Adirondack Park Agency’s regulations have not.

“The good news is that there are many things that the agency can do, all by itself, without the help of the state Legislature,” Houseal said. “It would require public notice, and public participation from all corners of the state. But real changes are possible, and in everyone’s best interest.”

Revised rules and regulations would better protect the environment without placing any undue burden on the economy, he said. They would also allow the agency to help revitalize local communities by helping them to channel future growth into sustainable locations and qualify for grants for community development, improved infrastructure and downtown refurbishment.

“The Cuomo Administration has stated its goal of making government more efficient. The changes we are recommending will save taxpayers money, provide more certainty for applicants, and update environmental protections,” Houseal said.

“The APA must better protect the park’s wildest places, which should be conserved as working forests and farms. These lands provide rural employment opportunities – and should not be broken into residential subdivisions. We need to learn from our mistakes as we plan where future development should go,” he said.

Among the items the council will ask the agency to address:

- Reform and modernize the APA’s land-use code to better protect the park’s working forests and farms and its wildest private lands. These lands were meant to sustain working forests and

farms, not to become second home subdivisions, the council maintains. They say new rules are needed to require that backcountry development be clustered into a compact area, and applicants for major projects complete detailed wildlife assessments before any application is deemed complete.

- Protect water quality by developing a water classification system for lakes and rivers that protects pristine waters from inappropriate uses and pollution; and, improving shoreline vegetative-cutting restrictions.
- Fix the APA's recently slackened enforcement program by, as budgets allow, reinstating enforcement staff that were reassigned due to budget cuts.
- Revitalize local communities by providing funds and expertise to complete local land-use plans. Most development in the park is outside of a village or hamlet, mainly because only 19 of the park's 103 towns and villages have APA-approved land-use plans. This is not due to a lack of interest, but rather a lack of funds and personnel, the council says. More local land use planning and better local zoning would also relieve some of the APA's monthly permit-review burden by allowing local governments to review smaller projects by themselves.

The council is also calling on the governor and lawmakers to make changes to the Adirondack Park Agency Act, which is the basic framework for the agency's duties, responsibilities and jurisdictional authority. The council believes that all are weaker than similar land-use agencies in other states.

The Adirondack Park Agency (APA) was created by Gov. Nelson Rockefeller in 1971, after resort development and the construction of an interstate highway (I-87) through the park prompted a public call to protect the Northeast's wildest and most remote landscape. None of those rules has been amended since 1978, when several were weakened, the council says.

"We must, as a society, agree to avoid building new homes and businesses too close to shorelines, on steep slopes, or in places that wildlife needs to survive," Houseal said. "We must recognize that we have allowed 9 of every 10 homes in this park to be constructed outside of an existing community. That trend threatens the park's wildest places and is causing a decline in the park's villages and hamlets."

Among the routine items the agency's Rules Committee is scheduled to consider Thursday is a proposal from Independent Towers to construct a new 100-foot telecommunication tower, concealed as a simulated pine tree, in the Town of Clifton, St. Lawrence County.