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APA OKs draft trail plan update

By HEATHER NELLIS, For the Express

RAY BROOK—If everything goes according to state plans, snowmobile trails will not be the same in the Adirondack Park.

The Adirondack Park Agency (APA) Board of Commissioners ruled in November that proposed new snowmobile trail guidelines are consistent with the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan (SLMP).

The document, named “Management Guidance: Snowmobile Trail Siting, Construction and Maintenance on Forest Preserve Lands in the Adirondack Park,” will serve as a tool to implement a snowmobile plan that was created in 2006.

Some areas will lose trail mileage, some trails will be widened and some riders may be able to dash through powder on new trails for a more traditional Adirondack snowmobiling experience.

WHY

The APA is a state agency responsible for creating the SLMP and making amendments to it. The SLMP is regulations for managing state lands within the Adirondack Park.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation is responsible for preparing unit management plans (UMPs) for variously zoned areas of state lands within the park, which then must be reviewed by the APA for SLMP compliance.

In 2007, the APA and DEC staff agreed there was a need to interpret provisions concerning snowmobile trails on state land in the park.

A joint effort between DEC and APA staff ensued, which included field investigation and discussion of trail construction and maintenance with representatives of the New York State Snowmobile Association (NYSSA).

SAFER CONNECTIONS

The result is a management plan intended to improve safe connections among park communities and minimize potential adverse environmental impacts.

To improve connector trails, the DEC wants to establish something it has dubbed “community connector” or Class II trails. They would be located in the “periphery” of areas zoned as Wild Forest and within two miles of major highways, with slightly wider than present standards.

These trails would be complemented by the designation of another new class of trails, secondary or Class I trails, intended to preserve a more traditional type of Adirondack experience.

“These actions will serve to ensure available wintertime recreational opportunities in Wild Forest areas are not dominated by snowmobile use,” the plan reads.

SOME EXIST NOW

Many of the connector trails already exist. Under the new plan the focus is on improving them through maintenance and reroutes to reduce the current mileage of interior trails in favor of trails on the periphery of state lands.

The secondary trails would be maintained at a maximum eight-foot cleared width, while the community connector trails would be widened to either 9 or 12 feet.

Some existing snowmobile trails, most likely within the interior of Wild Forest areas or adjacent to private land, would be re-designated for non-motorized use or abandoned as trails altogether.

The guidance also provides for trail rock removal, side slope management, drainage and tree cutting.

CITIZEN GROOMERS

The plan recognizes the state’s reliance on its citizens for snowmobile trail maintenance and grooming.

According to a memo from APA Associate Counsel Ken Hamm, “The [DEC’s] lack of sufficient staff and fiscal resources to itself perform all the administrative activities authorized by the Master Plan that are necessary for environmental protection and public safety is not new, and has been the case since before the adoption of the Master Plan in 1972.”

If the DEC were not allowed to delegate administrative activities to other entities, the memo continues, structures and improvements authorized by the Master Plan and unit management plans could not be adequately maintained.

Hence, the DEC has proposed three types of stewardship agreements: temporary revocable permits, Adopt-A-Natural Resource Agreements and contracts.

WHEN

Because the Maintenance Guidance was only recently approved, DEC’s process of updating UMPs hasn’t started.

DEC Spokeswoman Lori Severino said updating a UMP is a lengthy process. “It’s too early at this point to speculate when everything will be done,” she says.

The DEC would need to go through some 38-40 UMPs, update them, seek approval from the APA, hold public hearings, update them again and then seek final approval from the APA.

LAWSUIT

Another roadblock is a lawsuit filed by the environmental group The Adirondack Council.

The lawsuit alleges the agencies did not follow proper procedures last November for changing the management plan for snowmobile trails on public lands.

It also accuses the agencies of approving a management plan that violates state laws and rules. The lawsuit seeks to halt implementing the plan until these issues are resolved.