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Enviro groups argue legality of snowmobile trail guidelines

By MIKE LYNCH, Enterprise Outdoors Writer

RAY BROOK - Environmental organizations are questioning the legality of snowmobile trail guidelines that are scheduled to be voted on by the state Adirondack Park Agency today, while the New York State Snowmobile Association wants them to pass.

The guidelines would be used for locating, constructing and maintaining trails. Released to the public in early September, the proposed guidelines build off of the 2006 Snowmobile Plan for the Adirondack Park. A major component of the plan is to move snowmobile trails from the interior of wild forest areas (where motorized recreation is allowed, unlike in wilderness areas) and move them closer to public roads. Trails must have the character of foot trails.

Leaders from all three of the Park's environmental advocacy groups - Adirondack Mountain Club, Protect the Adirondacks! and the Adirondack Council - said that this current plan isn't consistent with the State Land Master Plan, making it subject to a legal challenge, though none of the leaders from the organizations said outright that they would file a lawsuit.

"The agency has to buckle down and go through the amendment process," said Dave Gibson, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks! "Otherwise they are subject to legal challenge."

One of the contentions mentioned by the environmental organizations is that community connector trails need

to be defined in the State Land Master Plan. The community connector trails (also known as Class II trails) would be up to nine feet wide in straightaways and 12 on turns, and located on the outskirts of wild forest areas. Environmental leaders also said the SLMP doesn't allow for tracked groomers on connector trails, like these guidelines do.

Leaders from all three environmental organizations made the comments to the Enterprise Thursday following a presentation by APA staff on the snowmobile trail guidelines. After the presentation, the APA State Lands Committee voted 4-1 in favor of them. APA Commissioner Dick Booth cast the lone dissenting vote, saying the SLMP should be amended prior to their adoption. Booth did state he thought snowmobiling was a proper use of the state Forest Preserve.

"If we are going to allow tracked grooming on Class II trails, you should do it with an amendment to the State Land Master Plan," said Neil Woodworth, executive director of the Adirondack Mountain Club. "I think we would be supportive of an amendment. I just don't think they are going about it the right way, and I don't think what they are doing is legal, for that reason."

Despite the criticism, the environmentalist leaders did say they supported the majority of the plan.

"There is a lot we can support," Gibson said. "A lot of the prescriptive work on the trail, a lot of the interagency work to keep the trails sinuous, snaky, natural contours, it's really good work. We applaud that. We applaud the overall guidance to keep these trails near the public roads and highways and other motorized routes and to reconfigure the trail system. I think that's very positive, but Dick Booth has it right."

But others want the plan to be approved today.

Dave Perkins, New York State Snowmobile Association trails coordinator, told the Enterprise Wednesday that he spent several days in the field with APA and DEC staff and worked out ways to limit the environmental impact of trails while also making them safe.

"There were any number of instances where one case, one solution would work and in another case it would be a different solution, but there always seemed to be a way to resolve the problem, and I find a lot of those solutions are in the guidelines," Perkins said.

Perkins also said that tracked groomers are beneficial to the process of maintaining the trails because they can do a better job than groomers dragged behind snowmobiles.

"One factor in tracked grooming that gets overlooked is that tracked grooming makes trails safer," Perkins said. "When you have the nature of the trail and Forest Preserve that meanders through the woods with a lot of turns, what happens is that, over time, these turns get banked and so snowmobiles can go faster, and they do. It's like Daytona.

"A snowmobile pulling a drag, it's much more difficult to get that snow off the high side and get it into the low side where it would flatten a trail out, but a tracked groomer with a blade can do that. So it brings the speed down."

Fred Monroe, executive director of the Local Government Review Board, often criticizes the APA, but he was in favor of the majority of the snowmobile trail plan.

"It was a good process," Monroe said. "It was DEC, APA staff and the snowmobile association trying to find practical solutions that satisfy both environmental concerns, compliance with the SLMP and the practical needs of the snowmobilers, which is I think is definitely the right approach to take."