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Legislators Split on Future Role of APA, But Agree Change is Needed

With pressure mounting on the Adirondack Park Agency over recent allegations of collusion with environmental groups, local legislators are weighing in on what changes need to be made at the park's primary land-use authority.

On Wednesday, Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward told the media that although agency reform is needed, its existence is still warranted.

But after sleeping on it, Sayward told WNBZ Thursday that her mind had changed.

"When I was asked that question the other day I said that it shouldn't be abolished, but it has strayed so far from the original intent," Sayward said. "The original intent was a good one, because I believe that planning is important for every community."

She said that the original intent of the APA's creation focused on land use planning. But over the years, it has become more of a police force than a planning board.

And for Sayward, the state Department of Environmental Conservation could probably pick up a lot of the slack if the agency was abolished.

"I'm completely convinced now that DEC could offer to the municipalities what the APA was supposed to offer in the beginning. It was meant to help them plan so that the plans that they come up with won't be detrimental to our environment," she said. "I don't see how in the heck a flat roof on your boathouse is detrimental to the environment."

A recent editorial in the Glens Falls Post Star called for the abolition of the agency, alleging that it has become a land acquisition tool of influential green groups, who use APA enforcement proceedings to coax landowners to sell their property.

But this opinion isn't universal, as state Senator Betty Little argues that the agency should be remade into a body that only assists local towns with the costly and time consuming planning process without enforcement capabilities.

"The APA has a role. I think if they worked with the local governments and got the more of the 103 towns to have their local planning units," Little said. "They have gone into legislation rather than just working with people and it's gotten so the average person can't afford to debate them or get a resolution."

Only 18 of the 103 towns and villages in the park currently have an adopted Master Plan, even though having one grants almost total home-rule authority on small-scale projects.

For their part, agency officials argue that the APA has consistently acted under its statutory charter and has never engaged in illicit activities.

Black Brook landowner Leroy Douglas recently filed a lawsuit with the state Supreme Court against the Adirondack Council alleging that the organization colluded with the agency in an attempt to force him to abandon his property.

Council brass vehemently denies any wrongdoing.

-Jon Alexander, 1-15-10