

Adirondack Almanack
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BLOG ENTRY

Commentary: On Towers in Wilderness Areas

by Phil Brown

This month the Adirondack Park Agency board authorized its staff to solicit public comment on proposals to save the fire tower on Hurricane Mountain through a bit of legal legerdemain.

I understand the board's motivation: the public wants the tower to stay. This has been amply demonstrated in letters, petitions, and comments at hearings.

But the solutions on the table are intellectually dishonest and make a mockery of the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan.

The tower is in the Hurricane Mountain Primitive Area. Under the master plan, Primitive Areas must be managed essentially as Wilderness Areas, where fire towers and most other man-made structures are not allowed.

Here's what the plan, written in the early seventies, has to say on the matter: "The fire tower on Hurricane Mountain is currently an essential communication link to the Department of Environmental Conservation at present. Should it be replaced by other means of fire patrol and communications, the entire area should be reclassified as wilderness."

Since DEC stopped using the tower years ago, the department has called for removing the structure and designating the tract Wilderness.

The APA has proposed two methods for thwarting the plan's intention. One idea is to classify the land under the tower as a Historic Area. In this scenario, the state or volunteer groups could rehabilitate the tower and reopen it to the public (the lower steps have been removed to prevent access). The other idea is to classify the tower's footprint as Primitive and amend the master plan to permit towers in Primitive Areas under certain circumstances. In this scenario, the tower could not be repaired beyond the minimal maintenance necessary for public safety. It would remain closed.

Under either proposal, the rest of the Hurricane tract would be reclassified as Wilderness.

Think about this. The tower is the only thing that stands in the way of reclassifying the Hurricane Mountain Primitive Area as a Wilderness Area. But now it seems that if we draw an imaginary line around the structure and call this patch Historic or Primitive, then—by bureaucratic sleight of hand—the surrounding lands become Wilderness. Even though the tower is still there. Even though nothing has changed except a few words in a document.

I suppose we could draw imaginary lines around every non-conforming structure in our Wilderness Areas. That would save us the trouble of removing them.

Let's be honest. If the APA adopts either of these schemes, it is approving the existence of a fire tower in a Wilderness Area. So if the tower must stay, why not take the straightforward approach and amend the State Land Master Plan to permit towers to remain in Wilderness? This solution has several advantages over those on the table.

First, it upholds the integrity of the master plan. The APA is charged with enforcing the plan. By creating a loophole for the Hurricane tower, it would not be enforcing the law so much as making an end run around it. Who knows what else could fall through that loophole down the road?

Second, it would spare us much hand wringing over the fire tower on Wakely Mountain. The summit of Wakely is classified as Primitive, but the master plan says it should be added to the Blue Ridge Wilderness after the tower is removed. DEC is using the tower for radio communications, but someday it may no longer be needed. If the master plan is amended, the summit could be added to the Wilderness Area with the tower intact. It's worth noting that you can't get a good view from Wakely without climbing the tower.

Third—and as surprising as this may sound—it could strengthen protection of the Forest Preserve.

A fire tower does no damage to the environment. The objection to towers in Wilderness Areas is an aesthetic one—a subjective judgment that most people disagree with. In contrast, motor vehicles do harm the environment. They pollute the air, make noise, destroy vegetation, and create ruts on the landscape. And in my experience, if a place is accessible by vehicle, you are more likely to find litter, broken glass, empty beer cans, and other evidence of abuse. For all of these reasons, motor vehicles are prohibited in Wilderness Areas. However, vehicular access is allowed in Wild Forest Areas, where regulations are not as strict.

Now consider that there are sixteen fire towers in Wild Forest Areas. Some of these areas could become candidates for Wilderness if interior roads were closed and/or “non-conforming” structures were removed. If we allow towers in Wilderness Areas, we eliminate one obstacle to upgrading Wild Forest Areas to Wilderness. Yes, the man-made structure will remain, but the land will be better protected.

Just this month, the APA voted to classify the state lands on Lyon Mountain as Wild Forest. The Adirondack Council had lobbied for a Wilderness classification, but one argument against this idea was that the summit is home to a fire tower. (The council would have settled for a Primitive classification until the tower were taken down.)

A few years ago, the Open Space Institute sold the state a large tract near Tahawus, but it kept a tiny parcel on top of Mount Adams. Why? Because if the summit were added to the High Peaks Wilderness (along with the rest of the tract), DEC would have been obligated to get rid of the fire tower. In effect, though, we now have a fire tower in the High Peaks Wilderness. We might as

well make it official by amending the State Land Master Plan and adding the summit to the Forest Preserve.

Furthermore, there are a dozen fire towers on private lands in the Park. As things stand, a tower's presence would militate against a Wilderness classification if the state were to acquire any of these lands. One of the towers is atop Salmon Lake Mountain on property owned by the Whitney family—a water-rich tract long coveted by preservationists. If the state were to buy this tract someday (the family says it's not for sale), environmentalists no doubt would urge it be designated Wilderness. Those who favor motorized access would push for a Wild Forest classification, and unless the master plan is amended, the fire tower would be one argument in their favor.

In short, by permitting towers to remain in Wilderness Areas, we would make it easier to create more Wilderness and protect the land against threats that matter.

And we would square our words with our deeds.

Note: the APA also is considering ways to preserve the fire tower on St. Regis Mountain in the St. Regis Canoe Area. One option is to amend the State Land Master Plan to permit fire towers in Canoe Areas. If this tower is to be saved, that's the way to go—for reasons similar to those outlined above.

Photo of Hurricane fire tower by Phil Brown