It was a riveting 90 minutes at the APA this week. In those 90 minutes, the NYS Adirondack Park Agency amended the State Land Master Plan. In doing so, the agency contradicted and violated basic definitions and guidelines that have been protective of wilderness values since 1972.

The big four amendments:

1. Authorize bicycling on nine miles of trails in two Primitive areas, the Essex Chain of Lakes and Pine Lake Primitive areas between Newcomb, Minerva and Indian Lake.
2. Authorize the use of motor vehicles to maintain those bicycle trails indefinitely into the future;
3. Authorize any able-bodied individual with a permit from DEC to drive into the heart of the Essex Chain of Lakes Primitive Area, and to park their vehicle at 4th-5th Lake.
4 Authorize the use of non-natural materials (such as use of steel) for the building of foot and snowmobile trail bridges in all Wild Forest areas of the Forest Preserve.

There were many other changes to the State Land Master Plan, controversial and not, but these are are the major ones.

What was riveting were statements from Adirondack Park Agency State Land Chair Richard Booth and subsequent reactions from the Park Agency Chair and other members. The customary APA good news machine – virtually required under the Cuomo administration – hailing harmonious collaboration with others and issuing self-congratulatory statements about achieving balance between environmental and economic priorities in the Adirondack Park were overshadowed by a few minutes of frankness.

As in the past, Mr. Booth never let debate became personal. It was all about forcing his APA to confront major public policy choices affecting the “forever wild” Forest Preserve and the Park. He did that before the APA voted to permit the Adirondack Club and Resort in 2012, and he did it again this week. Mr. Booth put his finger on the key problem the Agency faced in amending the State Land Master Plan: “The Primitive area definition remains unchanged. By allowing bicycling in a widespread section within two Primitive areas, and by allowing State trucks into those areas to maintain trails on just those two Primitive areas, we are allowing exceptions and activities which are in direct conflict with the Primitive area definition.” That definition states that Primitive areas are to be essentially managed as wilderness.

APA staff again protested that use of trucks and other motor vehicles and mechanized equipment to create trails out of the existing old roads and maintain these Primitive trails indefinitely would only be occasional, not routine. “A truck is not a chainsaw,” Booth replied to the staff. “You have to get the truck to the work site.” The very act of getting a truck to a work site, however occasional, means that the route must be maintained as a road, not as a trail, with serious impacts to an area that is supposed to be managed as wilderness.

“If I sound negative, I’m sorry, he said, “but we are weakening the State Land Master Plan. That’s what you are about to do.”

He went on to predict that the weakening of the SLMP today in two Primitive areas would invariably lead to future weakening of Wilderness guidelines affecting the entire Adirondack Park. Or, as my high school football coach used to drill into our heads, if you’re careless about the little things the big things will start to fall down around your head.

With respect to authorizing non-natural materials for bridge-building on Wild Forest, Booth made several policy points. First, that APA had not conducted
any analysis of need for the use of non-natural materials throughout Wild Forest areas – other than the one example of need across the Cedar River. Second, that the APA staff offered the voting members only three sketches or photographic examples of what future bridge design and construction with the use of non-natural materials might look like if broadly applied.

“You have not set the outer parameters and have not defined what bridges might look like in the future,” he said. Booth reminded his colleagues that when APA considers variances or permits for private land use we are used to seeing lots of visual material to allow APA to gain a clearer sense of the issues. Here, why are we only getting three visual images of what might take place within a broad swath of Forest Preserve, he asked. We have not had enough discussion about the problem, and policy choices, he said. There is no basis for understanding the magnitude of the change you are asking us to make, change that could affect all trails in Wild Forest” he told the staff.

To that assertion, APA Chairwoman Ulrich said that: “we should mark this as a major issue.” Member Sherman Craig noted that a large snowmobile bridge near his home was built out of telephone poles coated with creosote just to meet the natural material definition (wood), when it could have been built at less cost and fewer impacts using steel I-beams. “You make my point,” Booth replied. “We should be shown a picture of your bridge example. We need more facts, more visual images to consider in making sound policy choices.

“Setting parameters and establishing clear definitions are what public policy ought to do,” Booth said. APA staff has not done this, he felt. Other APA members reacted to his statement that they felt future members and staff could be trusted not to allow steel or plastic bridges over Wild Forest trails which are vastly out of character with the forever wild Forest Preserve.

Public policy is not about trusting that others will do the right thing in the future, Booth replied. It’s about clearly establishing the outer parameters of what is acceptable and what is not.

Mr. Booth moved that his committee delay on a vote on the bridge amendment until these matters could be resolved. Nobody seconded his motion.

About the exceptions to authorize bicycling and motors in the two Primitive areas, Booth said: “the average observer of our APA, on viewing these conflicts with the Primitive area definition, might conclude that either the APA does not know what it’s doing, which I do not believe, or that the APA has a magic pen that allows it to make exceptions to the SLMP wherever and whenever it wants.”

At the suggestion that APA is not following its own rules and uses end-runs around a document the paramount purpose of which is to be protective of State Land wilderness and natural resources, there followed (for the APA) quite
a commotion.

“\textquote{I have no interest in weakening the APA or the SLMP\textquote{}} asserted Chairwoman Ulrich. “\textquote{I take this job very seriously.}” She went on to explain her support of the amendments authorizing bicycling on the basis that the Essex Chain purchase in 2012 was unique and offered a unique set of management challenges. This echoed what other APA members usually say about the Essex Chain: “we made promises” with respect to the classification in 2013 which we now must keep. “\textquote{We all agreed two years ago to consider bicycling here,}” said member Karen Feldman. “\textquote{We lacked the tools to make this comfortable in a legal way,}” said member Sherman Craig.

The problem with those justifications is that the 2013 compromises to allow all manner of recreational uses regardless of what the Master Plan states while also attempting to protect the lakes were reached behind closed doors by an exclusive group called together by the Governor. The problem is compounded when the APA fails to abide by its own 2013 classification decisions because it was pressured to do so by the Department of Environmental Conservation.

For example, Mr. Booth again brought up the APA’s agreement to permit able-bodied individuals to drive into the heart of the Essex Chain of Lakes and park their trucks there. The 2013 APA classification decision expressly limited motorized access to 5th Lake only to certified persons with disabilities. Thanks to the APA’s spineless capitulation to DEC, those individuals with disabilities will have to compete for parking space with the able-bodied who could have wheeled their kayak or canoe or simply walked with their fly-fishing equipment to reach the same point. After all, the whole point of the Primitive classification was to keep the Essex Chain of Lakes and its environs motor free and free of aquatic invasive species. Trucks driven to the heart of the lakes flies in the face of that objective.

By my count, Mr. Booth moved that his colleagues amend the policy proposals before it in four ways: 1) to delay a vote until more evidence was presented and more policy discussion could be had; 2) to disallow truck access and parking at 5th Lake for able-bodied individuals (and to reserve it strictly for persons with disabilities); 3) to authorize use of non-natural materials for the bridge over the Cedar River only, and to disallow the amendment’s broad applicability to all Wild Forest areas; and 4) to allow bicycles into the Essex Chain of Lakes Primitive Area but to disallow motorized maintenance of those trails.

He got only one second, from Mr. Lussi on the last motion. On the final motion to accept the entire amendment package and its highly inadequate environmental impact statement, Booth was the sole dissenting vote – again. My Adirondack Wild colleague Dan Plumley summed matters up from his chair in the APA meeting room: “Booth made it clear that this Agency is the first to weaken the SLMP in its history.”