

# With big vote close, pressure is on APA

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Criticism of Adirondack Park Agency project review is ramping up as the controversial land-use regulatory agency moves closer to the up or down vote on the largest-ever development proposed in the park. And people in and around the agency have said that discussions about changing how the APA undertakes its core mission have commenced.

It's been more than eight years since developers Preserve Associates submitted plans for the 700-unit, 6,400-acre Adirondack Club and Resort in Tupper Lake. Years of mediation and adjudicatory hearings, involving dozens of interested parties, have produced a 10,000-page record that APA commissioners have just three months to consider before issuing a decision.

Commissioners are expected to vote on the project later this month.

But local government officials and environmentalists argue the process leading up to this point has exposed significant holes in APA review.

Adirondack Local Government Review Board Executive Director Fred Monroe said the years of rehashing and redesigning the project have cost developers millions of dollars, which will discourage further investment in the Adirondacks.

The two-day monthly APA meetings have since November focused solely on the high-end Club and Resort proposal.

The APA, reacting to criticisms of past discussions its staff members have held with interested parties outside of the public record, has split its staff into two parts - the review staff, which

has spent years combing through the massive record; and the executive staff, which is presenting the project to commissioners.

Monroe noted that commissioners have frequently asked questions that couldn't be answered by the staff tasked with explaining the project. All the while, those who could answer had to sit in the back of the room and refrain from comment.

"It should be like how projects are presented to local planning boards. The sponsor presents the project and answers any questions," Monroe said. "To me, that's better than what's going on now."

Since its inception in the early '70s, the APA has been charged with employing draconian, anti-business practices. But the agency has gone out of its way over the last several years to change its image, promoting itself as a user-friendly environmental agency.

Over the last two years, pro-project advocacy groups in Tupper Lake have taken over local politics and blasted anyone who has said the resort could expose the community to risk.

The mounting political pressure has environmental groups convinced the project is rocketing toward APA approval. Some environmental groups have argued the project's effect on the environment have been inadequately examined.

Last month, APA staff reported to commissioners that Preserve Associates hasn't fully addressed questions of how the Adirondack Club and Resort will affect the environment, especially in terms of wilderness fragmentation and stormwater runoff.

Environmental group Adirondack Wild, citing the staff's concerns, petitioned the APA last week to reopen the hearings. Green groups contend the process used to review the controversial development is flawed.

"The APA executive staff are trying to persuade the agency board to make a blind inductive leap by purporting that open space,

natural and wildlife resources are adequately protected with no basis for this conclusion," said Bob Glennon, Adirondack Wild's advisor and the former executive director of the APA.

An approval of the project is expected to lead to a rush of lawsuits against the agency.

Sources close to the story said APA officials have been meeting with representatives from local governments and discussing revisions to the agency's project review practices.

APA spokesman Keith McKeever declined comment when asked about the push to alter how the agency approaches its fundamental land use mission. He said no internal discussions about potential changes to project review procedures were ongoing.

Green groups and local governments would like to see very different changes to the APA's project review, although both see problems with the process.

"Each one of these people have questions," Monroe said of Commissioners. "They can't even get an answer."