

Views vary on Adirondack recreation plans

More Adirondack land to be opened for recreational use

Stephen Williams
The Daily Gazette

May 23, 2018



People gathered Wednesday at DEC Headquarters in Albany for a public hearing about the state's plan to lessen High Peaks crowds. Photo by Marc Schultz/Daily Gazette photographer

ALBANY -- Adirondack Park local government leaders on Wednesday praised state plans to encourage more recreational use on state lands in and around the Adirondack High Peaks area.

Environmental groups, however, even those that praised the thrust of the proposed unit management plan changes, said the state Department of Environmental Conservation and the Adirondack Park Agency are rushing through the review process in an attempt to address crowded conditions in parts of the High Peaks Wilderness.

The Adirondack Council "reiterates our core concern that natural resource protection must be prioritized over accommodation for recreational uses, particularly in light of the overuse issues we are seeing in various areas of the park," said Kevin Chlad, the council's director of government relations.

Chlad was among 13 speakers at a public meeting Wednesday at DEC headquarters in Albany, the first of three public meetings the DEC and APA are conducting about the plans. The state agencies are considering ways to reduce crowding at parking areas in the northern High Peaks, while encouraging more recreation on the newly acquired Boreas Pond tract just to the south of the High Peaks.

The proposed High Peaks management plan would incorporate the Boreas Ponds and other newly acquired state properties into a single expanded High Peaks Wilderness. It is the first update to the High Peaks management plan since 1999.

The plans developed by DEC call for the construction of 38 miles of new foot trails, mostly on the 20,000-acre Boreas tract, as well as new snowmobile trails, mountain bike trails and backcountry ski trails, mostly in the wild forest areas. It's what local officials, hoping to improve tourism options for their communities, want to see.

"We've sought balance, allowing public access while protecting the resources we all share," said North Hudson Town Supervisor Ron Moore. "DEC is committed to preserving this unique resource and helping North Hudson and other towns realize the economic potential of these lands."

There were only passing references to the state's plans to limit parking in some parts of the northern High Peaks because of the number of hikers using those trailheads. The popularity of the trails has often led to dozens of vehicles having to park on the shoulders of busy roads.

"A lot of people have testified about the solitude and other benefits of the wilderness experience, and that does not match up with the current experience in the High Peaks," said Bill Farber, chairman of the Hamilton County Board of Supervisors and past president of the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages.

But David Gibson, a partner in the environmental group Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, said the review process is being rushed by the state. He said the level of vehicle access being proposed at Boreas Ponds creates a risk that "the sense of wilderness will be destroyed."

"The [Adirondack Park] land use master plan still has the force and effect of law," Gibson said. "Protection of natural resources is paramount. Recreational use is very important, but it is secondary."

The proposed management plan allows people who have limited mobility to drive the entire 7 miles from the nearest public highway -- the Blue Ridge Road -- to Boreas Ponds, using Gulf Brook Road, a dirt access road created by the property's former owner, a paper company. Environmentalists said nothing prevents others from using the road and parking in the handicapped area.

"The DEC's plan to open the final parking lot [only 500 feet from the Boreas Ponds] to access by the general public is a terrible idea," said Adirondack Council spokesman John Sheehan. "It pits people with disabilities against everyone else in an unfair competition to get there first. It is also bad for the ponds. There would be a constant stream of traffic in and out of this area, with the accompanying noise from vehicles that don't belong in a wilderness and a real danger that someone with a bait bucket or firewood will leave an invasive species behind."

James Monroe, of the Adirondack Conservation Council, a sportsmen's organization, said the council supports the plans, but members nevertheless feel the state is acquiring too much land in the Adirondacks and then putting regulations on it.

"It's as good as we're going to get, but Adirondackers are feeling awfully pressured," he said. "We're being ruled by people who don't live in the Adirondacks."

Ron Konowitz, of Keene Valley, president of the Adirondack Powder Skier Association, said his group has 1,000 members even though there are no dedicated backcountry ski trails in the Adirondacks. He and other skiers welcome plans to develop such trails, he said.

There was another public meeting scheduled for Wednesday evening in Newcomb, closer to the High Peaks. DEC officials announced Wednesday that a third hearing has been scheduled for June 21 at the Lake Placid Conference Center.

The public comment deadline is June 27. Written comments may be emailed to r5.ump@dec.ny.gov.

The APA board could consider the plans' compliance with the overall Adirondack Park land use master plan as soon as its July 12 meeting. If approval is granted, DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos must wait a minimum of 10 days before deciding whether to approve them, said DEC spokesman David Winchell.