Travel corridor plan needs work

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Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve

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The state Department of Environmental Conservation’s long-awaited amendment to the Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor management plan has reached the Adirondack Park Agency in Ray Brook for a determination of compliance with the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan. This is the second time the plan has reached the APA. What happened the first time?

Buried in an appendix to the new plan is Franklin County Supreme Court’s 2017 ruling that DEC’s 2016 efforts to amend the travel corridor plan badly violated the APSLMP. “Approval and implementation of the 2016 UMP is an impermissible circumvention of the APA Act,” wrote Justice Main. “It does not conform with the SLMP” and “is not a conforming use of the land.” Converting Segment 2 to a “recreational trail … constitutes a reclassification beyond the authority of the 2016 UMP. It is an impermissible amendment to the SLMP.”

In brief, Franklin County Supreme Court roundly criticized the state for allowing the 2016 plan to circumvent the master plan instead of complying with it. The judge perceived several violations of law, including that an all-recreational trail was not part of the APSLMP travel corridor guidelines. The master plan must be amended to authorize the trail. Why the state in 2016 failed to see this remains a concern. It has been over 45 years since Gov. Rockefeller signed the first APSLMP. The agencies responsible then for protection and preservation of the natural resources of our state lands are the same responsible agencies today. Yet it took a lawsuit by the Adirondack Railroad Preservation Society — with all its time, divisiveness and expenses — to hit the DEC and APA with the proverbial 2-by-4 that their own APSLMP has the full force and effect of law.

In 2018-19, DEC completed what it ought to have done in the first place. DEC amended the APSLMP to incorporate an all-recreational trail within the travel corridor classification. Now DEC has gone back and redone the UMP amendment for a final determination of APSLMP compliance by APA. What are the results?

DEC has devoted much effort to this revised plan for the travel corridor. Replete throughout are details about proposed public recreational uses along the corridor, impacts and mitigation measures. However, as the APSLMP states (page 1), recreation on the state lands of the park is important but secondary
to management of human uses on the Forest Preserve to ensure the preservation and protection of the public’s natural resources. Here, the new plan falters. The DEC has not devoted any attention to planning for ongoing climate change and altered precipitation along a travel corridor that runs 119 miles through the heart of the Adirondack Park. Nor does the revised plan assess the impacts of more intensive recreational uses along the corridor upon 11 large units of adjacent "forever wild" Forest Preserve? What impacts of expanded snowmobiling and tourist trains have on wilderness character and resources? These impacts are not identified, much less analyzed and mitigated as required. What about human health and safety on long, isolated stretches of the corridor between Big Moose and Tupper Lake? These, also, are not analyzed and mitigated.

Adirondack Wild believes these and other deficiencies more than justify APA’s sending the travel corridor plan amendment back to DEC for several months of additional work. During the COVID-19 epidemic, work on the corridor will be delayed anyway. More staff work and analysis to ensure compliance with the APSLMP can occur now without slowing implementation of the plan.

What about the larger picture? DEC persists in viewing the APSLMP as mere guidance, or in misinterpreting its guidelines? APA occasionally stands up to the DEC, but just as often backs down, accommodating expanded recreational uses to the detriment of resources. Such a back-down occurred in 2016, when APA approved of bicycles on trails and use of trucks and other mechanized equipment to maintain those trails in the Essex Chain of Lakes Primitive Area. Needed is regular training in the master plan’s guidelines for APA members and for DEC. Needed are more APA members who will stand up for the APSLMP in difficult votes. Ultimately, what is needed are enforceable APSLMP regulations.

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