

Towns angry over suit

Green groups say snowmobile bridge violates law

By Tim Rowland,
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NORTH HUDSON | Representatives of the central Adirondack Five Towns coalition expressed disappointment and a degree of anger last week over a lawsuit filed by two environmental groups intended to prevent the state from building a 140-foot bridge for snowmobilers over the Cedar River in Indian Lake.

The bridge would close an important gap in a snowmobile route that town officials believe is vital to their economic future.

But Protect the Adirondacks and Adirondack Wild contend that the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is overstepping its legal authority because the Cedar is designated as a “scenic” river under New York’s Wild, Scenic and Recreational Rivers System Act, a classification that prohibits motors. Therefore, they contend, the state is trampling the Adirondack Park’s master plan as it pertains to protecting the forest preserve.

Peter Bauer, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks wrote in a press statement, “The state is violating its own laws and regulations. The new bridge is also unnecessary and redundant. Upstream of the proposed bridge there is

already an existing snowmobile trail bridge over the Cedar River. This bridge is part of the Cuomo Administration's plans to significantly expand motorized uses in the public Forest Preserve."

Supervisors say that transitioning private lands into state ownership cost the towns tax revenue, and if this is going to happen, they need some sort of benefit in return. The trail was that benefit.

The Five Towns group consists of Newcomb, North Hudson, Minerva, Indian Lake and Long Lake. They've banded together to promote their mutual interests, one of which is a multi-use trail that would connect their communities and offer multi-day adventures for snowmobilers, equestrians and hikers.

This vision came into focus with a historic state land acquisition known as the Finch Pruyn properties, which significantly added to the Forest Preserve. Town officials said they supported the land deals with the understanding that the trail would be built.

"A lot of promises were made," said Indian Lake Supervisor Brian Wells. "We all shook hands."

Now, Wells said, environmental groups are going back on their word.

Proceeding on the initial understanding, officials said, the DEC prepared to replace a bridge over the Cedar River in Indian Lake that washed out in the mid 1980s.

The environmental groups filed suit late last month, saying the Cedar River is protected against motorized use.

"All motorized uses, including snowmobiling and the mechanized grooming equipment that comes with snowmobiling, are disallowed in Wilderness," wrote the Adirondack Wild in a statement. Disobeying the law, environmentalist groups say, would allow a toe in the door that could lead to more motors and less tranquility throughout the Adirondack forests.

David Gibson, managing partner of Adirondack Wild, said his group was not privy to meetings where deals were worked out, but acknowledged the snowmobile trail was indeed agreed upon in 2013. But that doesn't make it legal, he said. The state rested its justification for the bridge on historic use when the land was privately held, rather than going through the process of changing the land's classification to allow motors. Because of that, green groups fear a bad precedent would be set by allowing snowmobiles in Scenic River classified area.

Wells said the towns are struggling economically, and that it would be a big boost if a regional trail could be built. With the redevelopment of the old

Frontier Town theme park property on the Northway, riders could travel through the mountains to Raquette Lake and even Old Forge, a popular snowmobile destination.

"It would be huge, especially with the development (of Frontier Town) at North Hudson," Wells said. "If (the environmental groups) win, this property does nothing for us."

"We are hoping (Frontier Town) would be a kicking off point for people who could ride from North Hudson to Long Lake," said North Hudson Board Member Ron Moore. "This would create a big economic benefit."

The environment groups, said Newcomb Supervisor Robin DeLoria, "want everything for themselves and nothing for anyone else."

DeLoria said his environmental record is strong on issues such as plastic bags, road salt and invasives. But he said towns need to find some way to survive. He said it's important to note that the inter-town trail is not just for snowmobilers, but for equestrians and hut-to-hut hikers, a compromise he said the environmental groups do not seem to understand.

"The entitled groups always seem to resort to extreme measures," he said.

But Gibson said, "We have no desire to be in court, but we feel a strong obligation to uphold existing environmental laws."