

Chad Dawson announces he will resign from APA board

by Gwendolyn Craig, for the *Adirondack Explorer* Magazine and *Times Union*
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Chad Dawson, center, pictured early in his board tenure, announced on Thursday that he would resign from the Adirondack Park Agency board. Photo by Nancie Battaglia

Chad Dawson, a member of the Adirondack Park Agency board who has frequently advocated for protecting the park's wilderness character, announced at the end of a contentious meeting on Thursday that he will submit his resignation to Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

Dawson criticized the state Department of Environmental Conservation's administration for elevating recreational amenities over environmental protection without sufficient study of the consequences.

"I understand people want things and the department may want things, but I don't think that's a compelling argument," Dawson said. "It's not an adequate justification for an agency and department whose first job is to protect the resources for present and future generations."

The announcement came after the APA board moved forward on two disputed projects that included creating a day-use area in the Debar Mountain Wild Forest and rescinding a campfire ban in primitive sites on the Essex Chain Lakes.

Dawson was the most vocal member against both proposals, though some of his concerns were echoed by board member Zoe Smith.

"I am leaving not because I don't care, rather because I'm passionate about the park, particularly protection of the park for future generations," Dawson said at the end of the APA meeting.

DEC spokeswoman Erica Ringewald later provided a statement calling Dawson's comments "disappointing and contrary to the facts," but thanking him for his service.

"DEC subjects every proposal and plan to a painstaking review and conducts extensive public outreach to solicit input and comments from the community in order to continue our work of protecting the Adirondack Park," Ringewald said.

Dawson, a retired professor of recreation resources management at the State University of New York's College of Environmental Science and Forestry, has been an advocate for the environment and natural resources during his time on the APA board. He served for 4 ½ years as an out-of-park member from Onondaga County.

One environmental group, Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, said Dawson's resignation was a loss and "does not reflect well on either APA or DEC, or Governor (Andrew) Cuomo."

Dave Gibson, managing partner of the group, said Dawson's resignation "reflects continued failings by APA to independently undertake their responsibilities for oversight of the State Land Master Plan and to view protection of natural resources as their paramount responsibility."

Even those who frequently disagreed with Dawson said he had a crucial role on the board.

"It's always important to have all views, whether you agree with them or not, so the decision-making can get pulled in the middle to where it truly belongs," said Gerald Delaney Sr., executive director of the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board.

Cuomo appointed Dawson to the APA board in 2016, replacing Richard Booth, of Ithaca.

Dawson said Booth warned him when he first joined the board that "APA was too understaffed to take on any large-scale regional or park-wide planning projects and DEC administration would only be interested in pushing UMPs (unit management plans) crafted to highlight their predetermined goals with little regard for full analysis for public comments and outside input.

"As Dick Booth predicted," he said, "that day has come."

Following Thursday's meeting, Dawson said he planned to submit his resignation to Cuomo on Friday.

A spokesperson for APA sent a statement saying that the agency appreciates Dawson's contributions and noting his "unique and experienced insight into State Land management and visitor use."

"We wish him the best in all future endeavors," the spokesperson wrote. "The Agency works closely with the Department (DEC) on State Land issues and prides itself on making educated decisions that strike a proper balance between preservation and recreational use."

Both the Debar Wild Forest and Essex Chain Lakes have unit management plans. Those are DEC assessments of natural resources on state-owned property, which also may identify public recreation opportunities and regulations. The Adirondack Park Agency's role is to ensure these comply with the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, a document with the goal of protecting the natural resources in the park.

Amendments were up for discussion to the Debar Mountain Complex. DEC and APA held a joint public comment period on several possibilities for the area, though the agencies particularly fleshed out a proposal to remove an historic Adirondack camp building and put up a recreational day-use area in its stead.

Historic preservationists have called for the 1940s-era Debar Lodge—between Saranac Lake and Malone—to remain, while environmentalists have called for its removal. The lodge was once privately owned, but since coming into state hands nearly two decades ago, it has stood as a noncompliant structure on wild forest lands.

The DEC, in order to create a day-use area at the site of the lodge, needs the APA to weaken land protections on about 40 acres near Debar Pond. Dawson spoke against this on Thursday, and said the state had not provided enough data on why it was necessary to have picnic tables, pavilions, a parking area and other public amenities.

"Is there a need, and is there a justification other than, 'It sounds like a good idea?'" Dawson said. "That's all I'm hearing so far."

Dawson said he would prefer to remove the lodge and let the area revert to wild forest, highlighting the Adirondack Park's State Land Master Plan's main mission of protecting natural resources.

Rob Daley, a forester with DEC, suggested that weakening land protections to create a day-use area could protect it even more since people are already visiting the site. Another DEC staff member said vandalism is a concern.

Dawson said he was "disturbed by the very summary dismissal of removing the lodge" and letting the area revert to wild forest.

Smith, too, said she would like to see APA and DEC explore the alternatives in more detail.

The APA's State Lands Committee had to decide whether to move the proposals to another public comment period, which would include public hearings. The committee voted to do that, despite Smith and Dawson's concerns. Later, the full board passed the resolution.

Later, Dawson found himself the lone dissenter on the Essex Chain Lakes proposal to allow campfires.

APA staffer Walt Linck presented the proposal, which would involve DEC building rock fire rings at 11 primitive camping sites. DEC has said it will monitor the area over the next several years and report back to the APA in 2024 if it thinks the campfire ban should be reinstated.

Linck said he has seen the damage campfires can do.

"But, you know, my job is to review the words on paper here," Linck said. Emphasizing that DEC would monitor the impacts and reinstate the ban if needed, Linck said APA staff recommend the board pass the amendment.

Dawson said he thought the amendment was "a smokescreen" for DEC not wanting to regulate, and compared the monitoring plan to researching whether smoking causes lung cancer.

Ultimately, however, the committee and board passed the resolution allowing campfires.

Throughout the discussion on both projects, Dawson said he did not believe DEC and APA had enough data to justify them. He said their "first job is to protect the resources for present and future generations."