Lake George zip line advances

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This image, part of a visual analysis of the proposed Bear Pond Zip-Flyer, shows how the zipline would look from the southbound lane of the Adirondack Northway, between exits 21 and 20. (Image — The LA Group, courtesy of the state Adirondack Park Agency)

RAY BROOK - A key state Adirondack Park Agency committee has approved a zip line project proposed by the father of "Karate Kid" actor Ralph Macchio.

The APA's Regulatory Programs Committee voted unanimously Thursday to advance the proposed Bear Pond Zip-Flyer in Lake George to the agency's full board, where it's expected to win approval today.

The zip line would run 3,450 feet from just below the summit of French Mountain in the town of Queensbury to Ralph Macchio Sr.'s Wild West Ranch and Western Town in the town of Lake George. Up to four riders would travel simultaneously on parallel zip lines at speeds up to 50 mph. Each ride will last about one minute.

The project involves construction of a launch platform, a pair of 34-foot
towers, a landing area and four cables connecting the towers. An existing access road up the mountain would be used to bring riders to the launch platform. The zip line would potentially be open year round. During winter, it would be used on a reservation-only basis, and riders would be brought to the top via snowmobile.

APA Deputy Director Rick Weber outlined a visual impact assessment of the project, noting several locations where it would be visible to motorists traveling the southbound lane of the Adirondack Northway, from 5 miles to three-quarters of a mile away.

Asked how long motorists could potentially see the zip line, Weber said one of the sections where it's visible is about three-tenths of a mile long.

"For a car traveling 60 miles per hour, that would be about 18 seconds," Weber said.

The zip line would also be seen from the top of the Prospect Mountain Veterans Memorial Highway and from other locations around Lake George.

Macchio had originally planned to cut a 900-foot long, 50-foot-wide swath of trees at the top of the mountain to provide enough clearance for people riding the zip line, but APA planner Suzanne McSherry noted that the proposal has since been modified. Selective cutting and some new plantings will be done below that upper section, McSherry explained.

"There will be trees that will be left underneath the zip line as long as they're not tall enough to get into the safety zone underneath the Zip-Flyer," she said.

Potential noise impacts were also discussed. McSherry said the Zip-Flyer will be outfitted with rubber wheels to reduce noise. An impact study was also done that, among other things, looked at how much noise would be created from people screaming as they rode the zip line.

"They simulated human screaming, and they also modeled it," said APA staff member Greg Bendell. "The effect, due to the distance and topography and the vegetation, the receptors didn't rise to the level of requiring additional mitigation."

 Asked if any alternative designs were considered. McSherry said a shorter zip line was looked at, "but the applicant felt that given the competition from the Bromley Mountain (Vt.) zip line and one either proposed or built at West Mountain, very close to this project site, that if they made a shorter zip line they couldn't be competitive with the other nearby facilities."

APA Commissioner Richard Booth seemed puzzled that staff was still recommending approval of the project even though it found its visibility "may have an adverse impact."
"Is there a code behind this language? What are we supposed to make of that?" Booth asked.

"No, there's no code in this," Weber responded. He said there is one view of the proposed zip line from the Northway that will "contrast significantly with the natural setting and will adversely disrupt the scenic vista in the area." But because of the mitigation Macchio has proposed - cutting vegetation under the zip line as minimally as possible and adding some new plantings - the project "did not rise to the level of being undue or inappropriate," Weber said.

Commissioner Bill Thomas noted that there's plenty of other development in the Lake George area.

"The whole area down there, inside or outside the Park, is impacted by a lot of human use and tourism events," he said.

APA Chairwoman Lani Ulrich said the visual analysis for the project was extensive.

"I didn't see anything that rose to a level of concern," she said.

Macchio told the Enterprise after the meeting that any visual impacts from the zip line will be "minor." He said no tree cutting will be done until the ride's cables are hung, so only trees that fall within the clearance area below the zipline have to be cut.

"I think it will be a lot less than 900 feet where we'll have to do tree removal," he said.

Macchio said he thinks the attraction will help make Lake George more of a year-round destination. He also said it will allow him to reopen his Wild West Ranch, which has been closed for three years.

The environmental group Adirondack Wild said the agency should have held a public hearing on the project.

"There were local hearings," said the group's Dan Plumley, "but because of the fact that the staff has recognized that this project will have an adverse scenic impact in the southeastern gateway of the Park, we feel the public that monitors the Park Agency, the stakeholders involved at the regional level should have been given the same chance to review this project in detail."

The project was scheduled to come before the full APA board for a decision late this morning.

The zip line received approval from the Lake George planning board last month. A final decision by the town of Queensbury planning board is expected Tuesday.