APA land plan update underway

GROUPS OFFER SUGGESTIONS ON 1972 DOCUMENT

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It might surprise some that there are areas in the Adirondack Park where mountain biking is forbidden.

Mountain bikes are not allowed in areas designated as “Wilderness” and “Primitive,” according to the Adirondack Park Agency’s State Land Master Plan, which hasn’t had a major amendment since 1987.

In the fall, the Adirondack Park Agency started a listening session period, during which various groups weighed in on ways the document, first drafted in 1972, should change.

“The last substantial update was in 1987. As the state purchased land we have been doing minor amendments to the master plan, but this would be the first major amendment since 1987,” said APA spokesman Keith McKeever.

The spark that ignited the discussion were proposed amendments associated with the Essex Chain of Lakes Complex classification. Proposals would allow the use of all-terrain (mountain) bicycles in the Essex Chain Lakes Primitive Area and non-natural materials for construction of a bridge over the Cedar River in Hamilton County.

“We were taking comments on those two specific amendments and also all the plan as a whole,” McKeever said.

There were four listening sessions in the fall in Newcomb, Ray Brook, Albany and Old Forge. In the new year, the APA will meet with stakeholders and the DEC to go over feedback from the public. The APA will undertake the State Environmental Quality Review Act process on the Essex Chain Lakes Complex proposals, and then the agency will develop a timeline to consider amendment proposals other than those related to the Essex Chain of Lake Complex classification.

And there are many more.

The Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages and the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board issued more than 20 recommendations for the document that governs land use in the park. The organizations said in a
report that a “sensible balance” between land preservation and economic
development, a term used by Gov. Nelson Rockefeller in 1973 when he
approved the private land use and development plan, is necessary.

“A human-friendly version, or sensible balance, has not been the reality
when it comes to state land use policy in the Adirondacks as evidence by the
troubling change in land ownership patterns over the past four decades,” the
joint report states, referring to a decrease in privately held land in the park.

The Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve environmental group
also issued a report with nearly 20 recommendations. Its report took issue
with the wording of an APA press release on the listening sessions that read,
“Since 1987 there have bene no major amendments to the APSLMP, despite
changing recreational activities such as mountain biking.”

“This statement wrongly implies that the overriding purpose of the SLMP is
to accommodate and manage a growing variety of recreational uses and
technologies on the Forest Preserve when in fact that is not its overriding
purpose at all,” the Adirondack Wild report reads. Instead, the report says
the plan is “the policy pathway in which New Yorkers carry out Article XIV —
the ‘Forever Wild’ law in our state constitution.”

It should not be used to “balance” motorized and non-motorized recreation
between the Wilderness and Wild Forest lands, the report states.

The second paragraph of the State Land Master Plan contains language that
says “the unifying theme” of it calls for “protection and preservation of the
natural resources of the state lands” as “paramount.”

On the other hand, AATV and the Local Government Review Board would like
to change what is “paramount” and states the plan “has not kept up” with
sensible changes as reflected in an aging populations and the effects of the
recession.

They suggest the second paragraph be reworded to reflect this unifying
theme: “... protection and preservation of the natural resources of the state
lands must be undertaken in sensible balance with the needs of the park’s
permanent, seasonal and transient populations.”

On mountain biking specifically, Adirondack Wild said it supports mountain
biking in Wild Forest areas of the park and said it could support the “limited
use of mountain bicycles on marked routes that do not damage natural
resources in those Primitive Areas where it is extremely unlikely or
impossible to reclassify those areas as “Wilderness” in the future. The
organization said it would only endorse this if the APA does a sustained
public review of primitive areas and their capacity for “reclassification to
Wilderness.”
On bridges, Adirondack Wilderness said it would support consideration of using steel or other materials on a case-by-case basis only in primitive areas where a future Wilderness classification is extremely unlikely. The AATV and Local Government Review Board’s report includes recommendations for appropriate uses on several forms of recreation.

“We believe that the plan should be updated to allow bicyclists to use existing roads, horse trails, snowmobile trails and state truck trails in those areas where the infrastructure of the roads/trails exists to support it,” the report reads.

The current plan states a snowmobile trail has the same character as a foot trail, which may have been true in 1987, but snowmobiles in 2014 need wider paths and turns and deeper snowpack, which is more like a horse trail, the report reads, and suggests for the change in the definition.

It also calls the apportionment of land in the park “unbalanced” with 2,614,000 acres of state-owned land, a 15 percent increase from 1972, and an increase in state-owned conservation easements from 1,496 acres in 1972 to 778,000 acres in 2014. Private land has decreased 31 percent since 1972, from 3,599,000 acres to 2,467,893 acres in 2014, which is 42 percent of the total acreage in the park.

Adirondack Wild’s report calls for a public process of development of better management planning by the DEC with oversight under the reused SLMP of the state-held conservation easements.

The AATV recommendations, which gained support from numerous municipalities around the park, also calls for a change in signage policies to allow businesses to have standardized moderate-sized signs on the Northway and other main corridors.

Another recommendation calls for invasive species control measures, including directing the DEC to set up boat-washing stations similar to Lake George’s program, and a detection and treatment program for terrestrial invasive species introduced by firewood and other sources. This recommendation calls for a penalty for importing wood beyond the 50-mile limitation.

**A sampling of recommendations**

The Adirondack Park Agency accepted comments on proposed revisions to the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, which governs use of the 2.6 million acres of state-owned land in the park.

The Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve environmental group issued a special report calling for a new vision for “Forever Wild,” as outlined
in the state constitution, and a strengthening of the master plan. Here are some of their many specific recommendations:

* No weakening of definitions or guidelines for wilderness and canoe areas. All non-conforming roads into wilderness areas should be closed and fully restored to wild conditions.

* List specific primitive areas where the ultimate goal is to upgrade them to wilderness classification.

* Clearly define group competitive recreational events and incorporate guidelines that clearly prohibit inappropriate group events in designated wilderness areas.

The Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages and the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board have advocated for review of the plan in the past, saying it is in need of significant revisions to “reflect the realities of today’s Adirondacks,” according to a resolution passed by several municipalities supporting the groups’ recommendations.

Here are some of them:

* Allow restoration and maintenance of vistas through trimming and cutting vegetative growth that blocks views from scenic vistas.

* Grooming of cross country ski trails be allowed in Wild Forest areas.

* Change description of bridges to allow for construction of bridged in steel materials.

* Add protection against aquatic and terrestrial invasive species.

* Allow moderate-sized signs on the Northway and other main travel corridors.