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State should hear alternatives on Boreas plan

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If the state truly wants to know how the public feels about the degree of restrictions it should impose on the new Boreas Ponds Tract in the Adirondacks, then it's irresponsible for those officials to limit public comment to three inadequate choices.

Yet that's what the Adirondack Park Agency is planning to do as it considers how much human activity to allow in the 21,760-acre area, located west of the Northway around the Schroon Lake and North Hudson exits — not too far from here.

The APA, the state's planning and regulatory arm in the Adirondacks -- will hold hearings in November and December on three potential options for the newly purchased area.

One of those hearings is tentatively scheduled for Dec. 7 in Albany. A decision on the classification is expected early next year.

All three proposals would divide the tract into Wilderness, where no motorized use is allowed, and Wild Forest, where some motorized use can be permitted. According to the Adirondack Almanack, the amount of Wilderness would range from 10,178 acres to 14,669 acres under the APA's plan.

Under all of the proposals, the publication reported, visitors would be allowed to drive vehicles all the way up to the Boreas Ponds themselves, something some environmental groups say should not be allowed.

A number of Adirondack environmental organizations — including Protect the Adirondacks, Adirondack Wilderness Advocates, the Nature Conservancy, and Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve — favor tighter restrictions that go beyond the three options scheduled to be discussed in the public hearings.

"These three options are mystifyingly reckless," said Protect the Adirondacks director Peter Bauer in a press release.

"The awesome stillness that surrounds Boreas Ponds is a rare, limited resource in and of itself. APA should value that Wilderness resource, including the opportunity to experience such solitude in the future," Adirondack Wild Managing Partner David Gibson said in a separate release.

The APA's apparent justification of needing the road access for dam maintenance is really a guise, some say, for allowing recreational use.

Some groups favor keeping vehicles at least a mile away from the ponds in order to protect them, requiring hikers and boaters/kayakers to walk the rest of the way from their cars to the water.

Among the ideas the state should consider, Bauer says, is a total Wilderness option. That is not scheduled to be discussed at the public hearings.

If all these environmental groups — whose sole existence is based on protecting the rare and sensitive Adirondack environment — say more protections are needed, shouldn't the state at least be willing to listen to what they have to say?

The Adirondacks have a long history of conflict between people who want to heavily protect the environment and those who want to see more development and public access.

Both make strong arguments for their respective positions, and both deserve to be heard on matters as significant as this.

What's the point of holding a public hearing if you're going to ignore what the environmental groups say?

What will the state learn by ignoring people who know and care the most about sensitive environmental areas and the potential impact of human intrusion on them?

The APA ultimately has the final say over what restrictions are put in place, so it's not giving up any authority by hearing people out.

At the very least, the agency owes it to the public to consider all points of view, not just the ones it wants to hear.