

Daily Gazette
December 8, 2016

Speakers make their case for how they'd like state to classify Boreas Ponds tract

The battle lines are drawn over the state's newest Adirondack property

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The battle lines over the state's newest Adirondack property — the Boreas Ponds tract — have been drawn. Now it's up to the Adirondack Park Agency to lay out the rules that will govern access on the property.

Even before the state in May finalized the purchase of the nearly 21,000 acres of former logging property just south of the High Peaks Wilderness and west of the Dix Wilderness, wilderness advocates and local Adirondack officials started arguing over just how much access should be allowed on the property.

The entrenched sides — which are far from monolithic internally — disagree over what types of recreational use create economic benefits; they disagree over state guidelines for classifying Adirondack land; they disagree over what forms of use are acceptable on Boreas Ponds.

But mostly they disagree over whether Boreas Ponds — which thanks to a dam built in 1997 is one large lake with a view of the High Peaks — should be classified as wilderness or as wild forest, and where that line should be drawn.

Under a wild forest designation, motorized vehicles could have access all the way to the shores of the lake and even allow for motor boats on the lake. But wilderness advocates say that would be a dramatic departure from the park's long history of preservation.

Each side had its last chance in Albany on Wednesday to make its case at the final of eight public hearings held across the state this fall. Written comments will be accepted through Dec. 30. Park agency staff presented four options for land classification, but the agency board could approve an altogether different classification map for the property.

A handful of Adirondack town supervisors, including those from North Hudson and Newcomb, the towns closest to Boreas Ponds, expressed support for the least restrictive alternative available. Under that option, dubbed Alternative 1, the shores and water of Boreas Ponds would be classified as Wild Forest, potentially allowing for motorized boat access on the lake.

They argue the less restrictive access rules would bring in boaters, fishermen, campers, snowmobilers, and hikers of all ages and abilities, boosting local economies. The pro-access

group also argued that the existing road infrastructure and logging history means the property has the “capacity” to support the wider array of recreational uses.

“I’ve seen some of these views from the mountaintop; I get it, but never once did I ask myself if I was in wilderness or wild forest. I was lost in the moment,” North Hudson Supervisor Ron Moore said. “I don’t see why many of you feel you should have exclusive right to these lands.”

Wilderness advocates, however, made the case that Boreas Ponds could be one of the state’s last best opportunities to preserve a large tract of forest, wetlands and gorgeous waters located in the heart of the Adirondack Park.

“I support wilderness whenever and wherever. . . . Wilderness has a special sense, a special meaning and a very special magic about it,” said Peter Fish, a former forest ranger from Keene who has worked in the High Peaks Wilderness and other parts of the park.

Sporting green “I am for Wilderness” shirts, they pointed to the “unifying theme” described on the first page of the State Land Master Plan — which spells out the guidelines for classifying land in the Adirondack Park. The plan states that “the protection and preservation of the natural resources of the state lands within the park must be paramount.” They argued that if left to its own devices, nature will begin to reclaim parts of the property that were once roads or gravel pits, citing countless examples around the park where wilderness classifications had helped restore natural areas.

“No matter what we do, this area will become wilderness one way or another,” Fish said.

The tract contains 1,800 acres of wetlands, including five wetlands listed as requiring the state’s strongest level of protection, and is the source of the Boreas River, which ultimately feeds the Hudson River. The wilderness proponents were also miffed that park staff didn’t provide the public with a wider range of options, including one that would have essentially classified the entire property as wilderness, which would mean it would take a seven-mile hike to reach the lake.

Some of the speakers at the hearing told deeply personal stories. Scott Remington, of Bryant, was paralyzed in 1999 in a logging accident on Gulf Brook Road, the main access road through the property and to the lake. He and his daughter Jenna urged Adirondack Park officials to open access so that disabled people could get to the lakes.

“Should this group of people be discriminated against because they can’t walk seven miles or even a mile or half a mile to the ponds?” Remington asked. “It’s time for the state to do the right thing and make it accessible to all.”

A coalition of environmental, conservation, hiking and other Adirondack groups have been pushing a classification plan that would allow car access to within one mile of the lake, with a trail covering the last mile. The lake and most of the forest and wetlands on the property would be classified as wilderness, under that plan.

William Janeway, director of the Adirondack Council, one of the groups in that coalition, said the debate largely boils down to whether or not the last mile to the lake would be open to motorized access. He argued that was the most ecologically sensitive part of the park and should be protected as wilderness.