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Tug Hill Commission Releases “The Roads Less Traveled: Minimum Maintenance Roads” Issue Paper

WATERTOWN, NEW YORK – The New York State Tug Hill Commission has provided technical assistance to towns on minimum maintenance road designation for over two decades. To provide support to the region’s councils of governments, the commission recently compiled an issue paper on the topic, available on the commission’s website at www.tughill.org.

Town roads make up the majority of the transportation network in many rural areas of New York State. Towns are challenged to balance road maintenance that meets access requirements for residents and landowners, with keeping costs low, and therefore property taxes low, for those same residents and landowners. Minimum maintenance road designations, based on recommendations of the NYS Local Roads Research and Coordination Council, are an important tool used to strike that balance. Laws designating minimum maintenance roads have been adopted using home rule provisions. Recent legal challenges have prioritized the need for such designations to be authorized in state Highway law.

“Minimum maintenance road designation is a critical tool for the core towns on Tug Hill,” said Roger Tibbetts, chairman of the Cooperative Tug Hill Council. “While towns have used their home rule authority to designate certain town roads that meet stringent requirements as “minimum maintenance,” recent legal challenges have only emphasized the necessity for the state to specifically authorize the local designation in state law.”

David Orr, Director of the Cornell Local Roads Program, stated “We support the use of minimum maintenance highways as part of an overall plan of upgrading and maintaining low volume highways using realistic and reasonable standards that balance the needs of the public and the costs to the local highway department.”

There are approximately 158 miles of minimum maintenance roads on Tug Hill, 100 miles of which serve as snowmobile trails in the winter. Total mileage of snowmobile trails on Tug Hill is approximately 925 miles. In a worst-case scenario, if towns lost the ability to designate minimum maintenance roads and had to convert all those roads to year-round vehicle accessibility, 15% of the snowmobile trails on Tug Hill would be closed.

“Minimum maintenance roads provide an important opportunity for snowmobile trails which contribute \$868 million to the economy of the state in an average year. The economic contribution of the sport would suffer if these roads were all opened to motor vehicle traffic in the winter,” said Dominic Jacangelo, president of the New York State Snowmobile Association.

Fifty-nine miles of minimum maintenance roads on Tug Hill are located in the sparsely populated, environmentally unique core forest. Limiting year-round access to roads in the core reduces land fragmentation and conversion. The Tug Hill core forest is a regional priority in the NYS Open Space Plan for both NYS Department of Environmental Conservation Regions 6 and 7, is an Important Bird Area by Audubon New York, and is identified as a key wildlife habitat connected to the Adirondack Park.

Linda Garret, executive director of the Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust, stated “The core forest of Tug Hill is a priority area for protection for the Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust. This unique area is recognized by NYS as well as many other conservation organizations. The minimum maintenance road legislation would help prevent forest fragmentation and protect the integrity of the core forest while helping towns manage their limited budgets by limiting sprawl development along these specially designated roads.”

Many of Tug Hill’s minimum maintenance roads are a legacy of Tug Hill’s original settlement in the early 1800’s, with much higher population densities and development than exists now. Roads were built to standards never meant to accommodate passenger vehicles year-round. By allowing the minimum maintenance designation, towns can maintain access for recreation, agriculture and forestry, at the same time following NY’s Smart Growth principles.

“By using this tool, rural towns across New York State can maintain existing infrastructure while encouraging development in municipal centers, and conserving open space and natural resources,” stated commission executive director Katie Malinowski.

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The New York State Tug Hill Commission is a non-regulatory state agency charged with helping local governments, organizations, and citizens shape the future of the region, especially its environment and economy. The commission uses a grassroots approach to build local capacity and provide technical assistance in land use planning, community development, and natural resource management.