

Highway Could Cut Through Zavidovo

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The Federal Road Agency has denied rumors that it plans to run the Moscow–St. Petersburg highway through a national park, in an apparent bid to avert a fresh clash with conservationists.

But representatives of local green groups say they are already bracing themselves for a repetition of the battle over the Khimki forest and dismissed the agency's reassurance as a barefaced lie.

"Our position is that the road will not go through the Zavidovo national park because it would be illegal," an agency spokesman told The Moscow Times on Tuesday.

"That's a lie. They're simply going to prepare documents to allow the road to go through the national park," said Semyon Yolkin, a Klin resident and coordinator of a group of local public groups rallying against the plans.

The plans to build the road through the 125-square-kilometer Zavidovo national park came

to light last Thursday at a public meeting about the section that will run through Klin.

Plans displayed at the meeting showed a portion of the road running through national park territory parallel to the existing railway on its western side. The railway currently forms the eastern edge of the national park.

Yolkin said suspicions were confirmed when the local mayor "bragged on local television that he's a bigger fish than the Federal Guard Service and saved his industrial zones by making the road go through the park."

Federal Guard Service (FSO) has jurisdiction over the area because it provides security for a presidential residence in the park, environmentalists say. The FSO could not be reached for confirmation.

Unlike the Khimki forest, which was redesigned as land open for development, there would be no legal ambiguity about road-building in Zavidovo — it would simply be illegal.

The Federal Road Agency seems to agree — at least in public — but its spokesman admitted when pressed that, if the law changed, the road could go ahead along the route through the park.

Environmentalists and Klin activists even say the final decision will be made during a "secret meeting" at Federal Guard Service headquarters on Thursday.

"In their desire to avoid a repetition of what happened with Khimki, they're trying to do everything secretly," Yolkin said.

"No one knows who's going to be at this meeting. We're asking to take part so there's no funny business," said Yolkin, whose group picketed the Federal Guard Service on Wednesday.

Calls to the guard service went unanswered Wednesday, while the road agency's press service denied any knowledge of the mysterious meeting.

The Moscow-St. Petersburg highway is being built in sections under a concessionary scheme under which foreign investors will receive the right to charge tolls.

The Federal Road Agency said there is no concessionaire for the section running through Klin, and it may not have one. Work on the section is projected to start in 2014 to 2016.

Protestors opposed to the route through the Khimki forest managed to hold up work on the first section for several months while a presidential commission considered alternative routes.

The commission approved the original route in December.

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