



‘Leave the fire towers alone’
Diverse crowd tells DEC to keep St. Regis fire tower

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Snowshoers are seen atop St. Regis Mountain Saturday through the bottom of the mountain's fire tower, which is in jeopardy of being torn down.
(Enterprise photo — Morgan Ryan)

PAUL SMITHS - A Saranac Lake artist, an architectural expert, a college student from Mississippi and a sea captain from Lake Ontario were among a diverse group of 18 speakers who showed up at Paul Smith's College Wednesday night to give state the same message: Don't remove the St. Regis Mountain fire tower.

Only one speaker on the night spoke in favor of tearing down the tower: John Davis of the Adirondack Council.

"The people who want to keep this tower on top of the mountain aren't the extremists," said Bill Ulinski, of Rainbow Lake. "No, this is the mainstream, a much bigger group of folks."

The tower is one of two the state Department of Environmental Conservation said needs to be removed in order to comply with the Adirondack State Land Master Plan. The St. Regis Mountain fire tower is located in the St. Regis Canoe Area, which is managed like wilderness. The Hurricane Mountain fire tower is located in the Hurricane Mountain Primitive Area, a classification that is supposed to be headed toward wilderness. A public hearing is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. tonight at Keene Central School.

Above all, most speakers talking before an audience of about 75 people Wednesday pointed out that the fire towers have become part of the human heritage in the Park. They are places people visited as children, places where people learned about the Forest Preserve by viewing it from the

tower cabins, and places where people go to seek solace during hard times. For most people, the fire towers aren't a symbol of humans' intruding on nature but of humans' positive interaction with nature.

"I think it's an important part of our history here in the Adirondacks," Lake Placid resident Jim McCulley said. "I think it's something that really goes to show man's care for the Forest Preserve. They installed fire towers for the specific reason of protecting the Forest Preserve, and I think it is something that has really become an institution here in the Adirondacks."

Speakers pointed to numerous opportunities that fire towers present for people to work together in a positive manner. Saranac Lake artist Sandra Hildreth is a member of the group that restored the Azure Mountain fire tower north of St. Regis Mountain. Every summer she is one of many stewards who volunteer a few days to stand atop the mountain and educate people about the natural and human history of Azure and its surroundings.

"It seems to me the DEC is throwing away a wonderful educational opportunity to spend a day on the mountain and tell people about managed forestry, about all the stuff that goes on, about what the DEC does, all the positive things," Hildreth said. "And you're just losing that if you take the tower down."

Steven Engelhardt, executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, said the master plan "hasn't kept up with the way we've evolved as a society when looking at these things.

"Progressive wilderness thinkers and academics, people like William Cronon, increasingly are recognizing that cultural and natural resources are equally important to a full understanding of place and that the juxtaposition of a man-made object like a fire tower within a wild landscape may teach us more about the value of this wild place, and about the complex relationship between the wild place and human beings, than just having the wild place by itself," Engelhardt said.

Other speakers talked in harsher terms. Gary Barber called upon the DEC to stop listening to the environmentalists pushing for wilderness. He called them "watermelon Marxists" who are "green on the outside and red on the inside."

"Leave the fire towers alone and cease your incestuous relationship with the watermelon Marxists, and if you decide to side with them, I hope to hell, when you try to remove these towers, you are going to be met with armed resistance," said Gary Barber. "Hitler had a master plan, and the Nazi party had a master plan, and I don't see where this state master plan is written in stone. It's not written in granite, sandstone or any other rock. It can be changed."

A few of the night's speakers questioned whether the decision to remove the fire towers was already made, including Sheila Delarm, of Paul Smiths, and Howard Aubin, of Black Brook. "What's going to happen here, not only with the APA but with the DEC, the minds are already made up," Aubin said. "The purpose of a public hearing is to satisfy a legal requirement before an action is made. You have to have it before you make the decision to tear the thing down. And that's the reason they are having these public hearings."

A man who referred to himself as T. Harrison said he was a student from Mississippi who is attending Paul Smith's College, where he is a natural resources land policy major.

"At this point what I gather from listening to these fine gentlemen, the only viable option is the removal of this tower," Harrison said with a thick Southern accent. "Now, I am definitely a proponent of keeping it there. Here's why. My father grew up in northern Mississippi. They have prominent pine territory there that fire towers look over. Lot of history there. A lot of history."

Don Metzger, a sea captain who lives on the shore of Lake Ontario, spoke about the profound impact fire towers had on his life. He recalled that as a young child still unable to walk, his parents put him in a pack basket and brought him to a fire tower. Later, when he was a bit older, his parents again took him to a fire tower where he encountered charts of the surrounding area. The charts had a big impact on him as he has spent his adult life using them to navigate as a mariner.

"I heard words tonight here from the well spoken audience," Metzger said. "Words like 'guardian angel,' words like 'sentinel,' 'lookout,' and I think of the fellow in the crow's nest crossing the Atlantic at 3 o'clock in the morning on lookout. He's way up there, all by himself. I think of the officer on the deck, on watch, and then I think back to the old ranger that I met at the top of the mountain.

"And as a little boy, I thought of him as some sort of a god. He just knew all about the mountains, and he knew what we were looking at and where what was what. And if we got in trouble, he would be able to help us. There was so much between when I was a kid on the mountain and the fire tower and where I am today.