

The DEC is calling for the removal of the Hurricane Mountain fire tower, a proposal that has apparently brought more opposition than support.

# Storm brews over Hurricane



## *13 of 18 speakers at Thursday hearing oppose fire tower's removal*

By MIKE LYNCH, Enterprise Outdoors Writer

**KEENE VALLEY** — When Gretna Longware rolled her wheelchair to the front of the audience Thursday night to speak regarding the removal the Hurricane Mountain fire tower, the room went dead silent.

All eyes were on the 77-year-old woman who has been fighting cancer for more than a decade. She has made saving the Hurricane fire tower one of her principal focuses in life.

"People in the area want the tower there," Longware said in a soft voice. "It's a landmark to them. To the little old lady from Elizabethtown, that's my statue of liberty. When I come home and see that, I know I'm home."

Longware was speaking in front of 75 people at Keene Central School during a public hearing on a proposal to remove the fire tower. Fire observers were first stationed on Hurricane Mountain in 1910. The tower was later erected in 1919 and used for fire surveillance until 1973. Today, the tower is in disarray and is no longer open to the public.

But that hasn't kept people from hoping it will one day be restored.

Gretna and her 80-year-old husband Melvin "Stub" Longware have

a special attachment to the fire tower. Stub's great uncle Joseph Denton was Hurricane Mountain's first fire observer in 1910. Plus, Stub's uncle John Longware was the forest ranger in charge of supervising the fire tower from 1920 to 1950.

For the past five years, the Longwares have worked together to raise more than 6,000 signatures in favor of keeping the fire tower, which is located in the town of Keene. The pair says they have also formed a friends group.

The fire tower is so important to them, Gretna said she'd like to donate \$5,000 toward its restoration in her will.

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Elizabethtown resident Gretna Longware, shown here in her wheelchair, has gathered thousands of signatures in support of the Hurricane Mountain fire tower. Here she is greeted by state Department of Environmental Conservation spokesman Dave Winchell.

(Enterprise photos — Mike Lynch)

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"I'm dying," she said. "I'd like to put something about the fire tower in my will."

But with the future of the tower in doubt, that might not be possible. Right now, the state Department of Environmental Conservation has proposed to remove the fire tower because the Adirondack State Land Master Plan calls for Hurricane Mountain Primitive Area to eventually become a wilderness area, which would not allow the structure.

The DEC is currently taking public comments on the issue, but many speakers said they think the fire tower will be removed no matter what they say.

The fire tower is one of two in the Park the DEC is proposing to remove. Both are in disrepair and are closed to those who would climb up in them. The other tower is atop St. Regis Mountain, near Paul Smiths in the St. Regis Canoe Area, which is managed like wilderness. During a public hearing Wednesday night at Paul Smith's College on the proposal to remove that tower, 18 of the 19 speakers called for it remain.

Thursday night, the majority was again in favor of keeping the tower. Thirteen of the 18 people who spoke about the Hurricane tower called for it to remain.

That's a total of 31 of 37 speakers at the hearings — 84 percent — calling for the fire towers to remain.

The opposition to the towers' removal has led the Local Government Review Board's executive director, Fred Monroe, to ask for an amendment to the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, which he said the state Adirondack Park Agency is considering.

"If it requires the removal of the towers, the master plan is wrong," Monroe said.

Because of that request, Monroe is hoping the DEC will halt the process to remove the towers.

"I would ask that the DEC not take any further action to remove the fire towers until that amendment process is heard, because once the fire towers are down, they are never going to be rebuilt."

One of the few to support the removal of the Hurricane tower was former High Peaks forest ranger Pete Fish, of Lake Placid. He said the tower is in disrepair and could be a liability for the state. If someone were hurt on the structure, it could lead to a lawsuit costing the state millions of dollars.

"It was closed in 1973, and by 1980, the stairs were removed," Fish said. "I could argue more for an historical thing if it was a complete unit, but the cabin, woodshed, outhouse and the phone line were removed around 1980, so it's no longer a complete historical unit."

Keene historian Janet Hall disagreed with this perspective.

"I believe our fire tower is an historic artifact representing our desire for maintenance of our natural environment," Hall said. "It was Verplanck Colvin's favorite viewpoint. All his work led the to the creation of the Adirondack Park and the APA the way we

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*Pete Fish, former forest ranger*

## To comment on the fire tower proposals

The proposals to remove the St. Regis and Hurricane Mountain fire towers are part of the unit management planning process.

The St. Regis fire tower removal requires an amendment the St. Regis Canoe Area Unit Management Plan. The plan to remove the Hurricane fire tower is part of the Hurricane Mountain Primitive Area draft UMP.

Copies of the documents are available on compact discs at state Department of Environmental Conservation offices in Ray Brook, Albany, Herkimer and Warrensburg. CDs containing all four documents are also available for public review at the town offices of Santa Clara, Brighton and Harrietstown in Franklin County, and the town offices of Elizabethtown, Jay, Keene and Lewis in Essex County. The following libraries also have CDs containing the documents for public review: Saranac Lake Free Library, Joan Weil Library at Paul Smith's College, Elizabethtown Library, Keene Public Library and Keene Valley Public Library.

A fire tower study for the Adirondacks is also now available from the DEC online at [www.dec.ny.gov/lands/62283.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/62283.html).

Additional information about the management plans may be found on the Web:

- Draft amended St. Regis Canoe Area UMP — [www.dec.ny.gov/lands/22588.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/22588.html)

- Draft Hurricane Mountain Primitive Area UMP — [www.dec.ny.gov/lands/62167.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/62167.html)

**The deadline for comments is March 26.** Submit written comments as follows:

- Draft amended St. Regis Canoe Area UMP: Steve Guglielmi, senior forester, P.O. Box 296, Ray Brook, NY 12977.

- Draft Hurricane Mountain Primitive Area UMP: Rob Daley, senior forester, P.O. Box 296, Ray Brook, NY 12977.

Or e-mail a comment on either of the two Draft UMPs or the Draft Amendment to [r5ump@gw.dec.state.ny.us](mailto:r5ump@gw.dec.state.ny.us).

know them today. And this fire tower is an artifact and a marker of this work. I believe this location should be set up as an historic district and made into a local setting for education and tourism."