

Outdoors

ADVENTURES IN THE ADIRONDACK PARK

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Group discusses St. Regis fire tower rehab

**By SHAUN KITTLE
Outdoors Writer**

PAUL SMITHS — After being closed to the public for a quarter of a century, an effort to restore the fire tower on St. Regis Mountain is taking shape.

Members of the Friends of St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower held a public meeting Tuesday at the Paul Smith's VIC to begin laying the groundwork for the restoration process, which they hope to complete this summer. To meet that goal, they'll need some help.

The 16 attendees shared ideas on things like fundraising, social networking and reconstruction, and urged others to get involved.

Dave Petrelli, a co-chair of the St. Regis group, led the discussion. He has some experience with fire tower restoration — he's the former treasurer and current member of the Azure Mountain Friends board of directors. In 2012, that group transformed the fire tower on Azure Mountain from a rusted-out hulk to a shiny, sturdy tower.

"I fell in love with fire towers right from the start," Petrelli said. "Azure was my first fire tower. One of my high school friends brought me up and I kind of got the bug. I can't say that I've hiked every single mountain with a fire tower, but every one I've been able to get to, I have."

Petrelli said the first step is to figure out what needs to be done and then figure out what that will cost. He said to expect the minimum cost to be around \$5,000, and added that it could cost as much as \$40,000. The Azure Mountain tower project cost more than \$23,000.

Petrelli said some of that cost was for educational materials, which are located at the tower. Members of the St. Regis group said they'd like to work on an educational component for their tower, too.

"If you think about it, this first summer is going to be the restoration," Petrelli said. "After that it's just maintenance, whereas education just keeps going and going. You do get a lot of bang for that buck, but that's where your expenses can go up."

Doug Fitzgerald, another co-chair of the St. Regis group, outlined some of the tower's structural deficiencies. He noted that there is some state funding available for the effort.

"Every piece of lumber on the tower has to be replaced," Fitzgerald said. "Every step, the floor in the cab, everything has to be redone. The department (DEC) is going to be able to get their three bids on that and come up with the lumber. That's going to be real big for us."

There are some other issues, too. The fire tower has been constantly subjected to the elements since it was built in 1910. Wind shakes it and rain, ice and snow pelt its exterior. Now parts of the roof flap in the breeze and the bolts that hold the tower to the mountain have loosened.

The group will make repairs under the direction of state Department of Environmental Conservation forest rangers. Rangers will handle some of the trickiest repairs, like the roof, and they will also provide volunteers with help getting materials to the summit via a helicopter.

Using a helicopter has its own caveat, though. In the Adirondacks, anything above 2,800 feet in elevation is considered an area of special concern because high-elevation species, like Bicknell's thrush, might nest there.

Since St. Regis Mountain is 2,874 feet in elevation, motors can't be used there from May 15 to August 1, leaving a narrow window at the end of spring to fly supplies to the top of the mountain.

DEC forest ranger Tom Edmunds attended the meeting, and praised the group for its efforts to restore the tower. He noted that almost 500,000 acres are visible from the tower.

"I've probably camped in the St.

Regis area over 150 days through the years," Edmunds said. "I know it decently, I could know it a lot better and I look forward to it. I'm glad that this is happening and I'm glad the DEC is behind it, and I'm also glad that there are a lot of private citizens because this is exactly what we need for this to happen."

In November, DEC Commissioner Joe Martens approved the unit management plans for the Hurricane Mountain and St. Regis Mountain historic areas. In a press release, Martens said finishing the plans "allows us to move forward with restoring these historically significant resources and opening the fire towers to the public."

The state closed 62 of its 103 operational fire towers in 1971. Others followed, including the one on Hurricane Mountain, which was formally closed in 1979. The St. Regis Mountain tower wasn't closed until 1990, making it the longest operating fire observation station in the state.

Since then, a lack of maintenance took its toll as state agencies and the public debated what to do with the towers. The defunct structures became unsafe and were closed to the public. Some environmentalists argued that the towers should be taken down because they were non-conforming structures in

areas managed as wilderness, while others said they have historical significance and should be restored.

To bring the Hurricane Mountain Primitive Area and St. Regis Canoe Area into compliance with the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, both fire towers were proposed for removal by the state Adirondack Park Agency in 2010.

Public comment periods were held for each tower, and the support to keep them prompted the APA to recommend classifying the land beneath each tower as a historic area under the SLMP.

Now that the unit management plans for this area are approved, the next steps include finalizing Volunteer Stewardship Agreements with the two groups that plan on to help with the restoration and maintenance of the towers: Friends of the St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower and Friends of the Hurricane Mountain Fire Tower.

The St. Regis tower was among the first eight built in the Adirondacks in 1910 in response to two major wildfires that burned nearly a million acres in 1903 and 1908. The Hurricane Mountain tower was built in 1919.

For more information, visit www.friendsofstregis.org. To contact the group, email friendsofstregis@yahoo.com.