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Sunapee group seeks protection for old-growth forest

By Glynis Hart editor@eagletimes.com 7 hrs ago



The Mount Sunapee Advisory Committee, a collection of state employees, and representatives of nonprofits and the public, met on May 29 in Veterans Hall in Newbury to hear highlight from the first Vail Resorts annual operating plan and comment on it.

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NEWBURY — During a year in which no new development is planned for the ski resort on Mount Sunapee, a local group is working to raise public awareness of what that development could mean.

The State of New Hampshire leases Mount Sunapee State Park to Vail Resorts, which manages the ski resort on the mountain. Vail plans to add two ski lifts and expand the Williamson trail in the future. Both moves would affect the exemplary natural area on the western flank of the mountain. The ski lifts would bisect 16 acres of old growth forest, and the trail expansion would affect the old forest that forms a buffer zone around the old-growth forest.

The Friends of Mount Sunapee have been giving presentations at towns around the state park. Steve Russell, of the FoMS, spoke in Newbury on Sept. 4. The group also provides information about the mountain and park on its website.

Russell explained that the 484-acre exemplary natural area comprises the old growth forest, the natural community and the mature forest around it, which buffers it. Within the old growth forest the plant community is dense and complex, with trees at many different ages. Beech tree disease, devastating beech trees in the state, for example, is not found in the old growth, nor is the woolly adelgid damaging hemlock forests across the Northeast.

“We need to expand and learn from these old forests, to perhaps learn how to bring our other forests back,” said Russell. “We don’t know everything about them.”

At the same time, the exemplary natural area has no legal protection.

Russell told the Newbury audience that the movement to preserve this forest is more than a century old. “In New Hampshire in the early 1900s there was a movement to create a national forests that grew out of a need to stop the excessive damage to statewide watersheds due to unregulated cutting of forests in the White Mountains. It was in this context that calls to preserve Mount Sunapee’s forests emerged.”

Efforts to protect Mount Sunapee from clearcutting began in 1909, led by Herbert Welsh, who made an annual trek on foot from his home in Pennsylvania 450 miles to the Welsh family cottage in Sunapee. When lumbermen began to cut the remaining timber on the mountain, Welsh contacted the fledgling Society for Protection of NH forests. In 1911 the Forest Society purchased 650 acres of primeval forest, its first

acquisition and the core of Mount Sunapee park. In 1948 the park grew to 1,624 acres, but with no protections put on any of the land, the state began cutting ski trails through old growth forest.

In 1997 the old growth forest on the mountain was rediscovered and the state's Natural Heritage Bureau documented the forest over the next decade to facilitate its conservation.

The Natural Heritage Bureau delineated the 484 acres of exemplary natural area, a tiny remnant of the state's forest heritage. This area now represents one-tenth of all old growth forest in the state.

“Basically, it has not been disturbed or interfered with by humans since the last Ice Age,” said Russell. “When you walk into it you can feel it immediately. The trees are incredibly twisted and gnarly and they're not organized in a way we can figure out. It's a beauty in itself.”

The bureau's repeated resource recommendation, from the 1990s to 2015, was unambiguous: “To protect in perpetuity the entire mosaic of forest types, including old growth,” Russell quoted.

“Those two principal recommendations have never been done by the state of New Hampshire. That's why we have the situation we have,” he said.

An exemplary natural community system is the highest quality ranking that can be conferred on a plant community, as well as a legal term.

“Furthermore it’s on public land. It belongs to everyone in the state of New Hampshire,” said Russell. “It is also easily accessible unlike other areas of old growth, and thus accessible for education and outreach. If left intact, it will provide the public with an enduring inheritance, thus fulfilling the sacred trust for which the state park is intended.”

If the planned ski lifts are developed, the area would no longer be an exemplary natural community system.

However, “The good news is none of this has been done yet,” said Russell. “As of Vail’s last annual operating plan there were no plans to go forward as of yet. But the area still remains unprotected.”

Currently, the Friends of Mount Sunapee are trying to raise public awareness of the danger. They are hoping that Vail Resorts, which owns dozens of ski resorts across the country, will be responsive to public pressure.

The state has already given Vail approval for the development.