



THE WORLD'S TALLEST FLAGPOLE. A TINY MAINE TOWN. AN IDEA MEANT TO UNITE PEOPLE IS DIVIDING THEM - ASSOCIATED PRESS

Posted on July 1, 2023 by DAVID SHARP | Associated Press



Lobster boat engines rumble to life in quiet coves. Lumberjacks trudge deep into the woods. Farmers tend expanses of wild blueberries. Maine's Down East region is where the sunlight first kisses the East Coast of the United States each day, where the vast wilderness and ocean meet in one of the last places on the East Coast unspoiled by development.

Which makes it a striking backdrop to one family's bold vision for the region: a flagpole jutting upward from the woodlands toward spacious skies — the tallest one ever, reaching higher than the Empire State Building. And atop it? A massive American flag bigger than a football field, visible from miles away on a clear day.

To promoters, the \$1 billion project, funded in part by donations, would unite people of all political stripes and remind them of shared values in an era of national polarization. Here's how Morrill Worcester, founder of Worcester Wreath, tells it: "We want to bring Americans together, remind them of the centuries of sacrifice made to protect our freedom, and unite a divided America."

So far, the project — called the Flagpole of Freedom Park — has done precisely the opposite. In Columbia Falls, population 485, the place closest to the patch of land where the pole would rise, the debate has laid bare community and cultural flashpoints.

Does the quiet area want the visitors it would bring? Would the massive undertaking scar the landscape? How do you balance development and environmentalism? How do traditional industries fare alongside service-economy jobs?

And perhaps most significant of all: How does an American town demonstrate its love of country in an era when even the Stars and Stripes themselves have been politicized?

A fresh coat of paint is applied to a dome building at the Wild Blueberry Heritage Center in Columbia Falls, Maine Thursday, April 27, 2023. Blueberries and fishing are the major industries in Down East Maine. (AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty)

The flagpole alone is an audacious proposal. It would be 1,461 feet tall, surpassing the Empire State Building, with elevators bringing people to observation decks where they could see clear to Canada. Frets one resident: "It's like putting the Eiffel Tower in the Maine wilderness."

But that isn't all. Morrill Worcester envisions a village with living history museums telling the country's story through veterans' eyes. There would be a 4,000-seat auditorium, restaurants and monument walls with the name of every deceased veteran dating to the Revolution. That's about 24 million names. Slick presentations showed what amounted to a patriotic theme park, replete with gondolas to ferry visitors around.

The Pleasant River flows through Columbia Falls, Maine, Thursday, April 27, 2023. (AP Photo/Rodrique Ngowi)

In Columbia Falls, many were stunned by the scale. It would require paving over woods for parking spaces and construction of housing for hundreds, maybe thousands of workers, potentially transforming this oasis into a sprawl of souvenir shops, fast-food restaurants and malls.

From overhead, the landscape here remains a sprawling green canopy. Below are dozens of streams, ponds and lakes brimming with trout and historic runs of Atlantic salmon. Deer, moose, black bears, beaver and fisher cats wander the forest floor. Interspersed with the woods are wild blueberry barrens.

"This is the last wilderness on the East Coast," says Marie Emerson, whose husband, Dell, is a beloved native son, a longtime blueberry farmer and university research farm manager.

She says it's that rugged coast and pristine wilderness that make this corner of the world special, and a large development could destroy woodlands and wild blueberry barrens that have been here 10,000 years, with Native Americans being the first stewards. She asks: "Do you want to kill the goose that laid the golden egg?"

Yet not all is gold. Tourists flock here in the summer to escape cities, pollution and noise, and to enjoy clean air and dark starry skies. But behind the beauty lies a region where many are struggling.

Logging, blueberry picking and lobstering don't always provide year-round employment; resourceful residents supplement incomes by digging for clams or collecting balsam tips for wreath-making. The region vies for the state's highest jobless and poverty rates. The county's residents are among the state's oldest, and it is dealing with rampant abuse of opioids.

There's a joke people tell around here. It goes something like this: We may send lobsters, blueberries and wreaths to the world, but our biggest export is young people looking for work.

This image from video provided by the Flagpole of Freedom Park in 2022 shows a rendering of a proposed world's tallest flagpole in Maine. The 10,000-acre plot is in a township overseen by a state agency, neighboring Columbia Falls. (Flagpole of Freedom Park via AP)

Morrill Worcester sits for a portrait at his wreath-making company in Columbia, Maine, on Dec. 1, 2006. The Worcester family, which started the Wreaths Across America program, wants to build the world's largest flagpole and a theme park honoring the country's veterans in Down East Maine. (AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty, File)

Worcester's unique-to-America story of pride, patriotism and hubris begins at Arlington National Cemetery and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, where sacrifices represented by headstones left an impression when he was a boy.

He never forgot, even as he built his wreath-making company. In 1992, he began providing thousands of balsam wreaths to adorn headstones at Arlington. That continued quietly for years until photos showing the cemetery wreaths against a backdrop of snow went viral. The annual effort became so big that its nonprofit spinoff, Wreaths Across America, run by his wife, now provides more than 1 million wreaths to military cemeteries and gravesites.

It has made this corner of the world synonymous with patriotic fervor. Motorists entering Columbia Falls encounter flags and phrases of the Pledge of Allegiance spaced along U.S. 1. A welcome proclaims, "Columbia Falls, Home to Wreaths Across America."

Few question the family's motives. But as the wreath program grew, some became skeptical. To them, it looked like Worcester had hitched his cart to a sacred cow — the nation's veterans.

Worcester unveiled his even grander gesture last year. Yes, he briefed local officials first. But most residents learned of details when, in an act of classic American showmanship, he and his sons staged a formal announcement with flashy graphics showing the flagpole rising — wait for it — 1,776 feet above sea level.

"Most people were, let's say, shocked to see that it was that large," says Jeff Greene, a contractor and one of the town Select Board's three members.

There was a bigger problem. The proposed site is not technically in Columbia Falls. The 10,000-acre plot is in a neighboring township overseen by a state agency. Worcester's solution: push through the Legislature a bill to let residents vote to annex the land.

He also landed in hot water months later when the Maine Department of Environmental Protection accused Worcester Holdings of constructing Flagpole View Cabins — more than 50 of them — without necessary permits.

Town residents began taking sides. Some saw a soft-spoken man trying to provide much-needed jobs and doing something good. Others saw a businessman accustomed to getting his way, trying to ram his version of America down others' throats. Patriotism, they said, isn't measured by the height of a flagpole. And divisive political discourse seeping into the local discussion? That's not great, either, says Greene.

"What we're desperately in need of in this area in the country, or in the world as a whole, is the ability to listen to somebody you disagree with in an attempt to find something of value," he says, adding: "Even if you disagree with them."

On a recent day, Charlie Robbins found himself deep in the woods alongside Peaked Mountain Pond. The silence was broken by chirping birds, the gentle breeze and the gurgling of water flowing into a stream that feeds the Machias River, where endangered Atlantic salmon return.

In the distance stood a hill rising several hundred feet at the far end of the pond. That's where the flagpole would loom above the landscape, topped with an observation tower with blinking lights cutting through the dark stillness of night.

"It would be out of place," says Robbins, a retired Maine Department of Transportation worker who enjoys hunting and fishing, accompanied by his dogs, German pointers Max and Libby. His Eiffel Tower comparison notwithstanding, he doesn't question the motives of the flagpole. "It's just different than my vision," he says. "I hunt and fish the area. I don't like the crowds. It's kind of selfish, but that's the way I feel."

Many agree. In March, residents overwhelmingly approved a six-month moratorium on large developments to give the town time to develop the needed rules and regulations. Until they figure it out, no flagpole. No giant flag. No patriotic theme park.

Still, it's a delicate matter to criticize the flag, which intersects with default lines in a country where politicians have wrapped themselves in red, white and blue.

During one town meeting, a resident said she didn't like the idea of waking up each morning and looking out her window to see a giant flagpole. Her comment struck a nerve.

Peter Doak speaks to a reporter at his home, Wednesday, April 26, 2023, in Columbia Falls, Maine. Doak, an Army veteran, supports a plan to build the world's tallest flagpole on undeveloped land just outside of town. "To say that the flagpole with the United States flag on it is an eyesore, I don't particularly like it. ... But they don't mind looking out the window at cellphone towers or the windmills." (AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty)

"That didn't sit too well with me," says Peter Doak, puffing on a pipe in the kitchen of his house, which was built in the 1700s. "Maybe one day we'll wake up to the hammer and sickle flying up there," he growls, describing the flag of the former Soviet Union.

The retired school principal comes from a seafaring family stretching back across five generations, including Naval officers. He broke ranks and joined the Army. He was a Green Beret in Vietnam. Criticizing Old Glory sounds unpatriotic to him and others who served — and to families who lost loved ones to war.

"To say that the flagpole with the United States flag on it is an eyesore, I don't particularly like it," he says. "But they don't mind looking out the window at cellphone towers or the windmills."

Morrill Worcester isn't saying much about it all these days. The Worcester family declined repeated requests for interviews. In a statement, the family said the project will move forward — while leaving the door open to changes.

The family is buoyed by support and donations — though it won't say how much money — and respects the wishes of town residents who want more time to study the proposal, Mike Worcester, one of Morrill Worcester's sons, said in a statement to The Associated Press.

"As we refine our plans," the statement said, "we remain committed to our vision, and remain more confident than ever that our evolving plan will result in a place where all Americans can celebrate our country's history of service together."

And so the project stands for now, frozen by administrative moratorium — a curious moment in the life of a town, and a glimpse into how the love of home and of country can be powerful, and can sometimes be at odds.

Doak, the army veteran, knows Morrill Worcester as a humble but determined man. And though Worcester never served in the military, no one questions his patriotism. Each week, Worcester stands alongside U.S. 1 waving flags alongside a group of residents, even in blizzards and rain.

A patriotic sign stands on the side of U.S. 1, Friday, April 28, 2023, in Columbia Falls, Maine. (AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty)

Doak describes his friend as a visionary. He frames it like this: People thought Walt Disney World, built in a Florida swampland, was a crazy idea. They thought Mount Rushmore was outlandish. Both are now treasured.

"I'm gonna tell you right now, he's gonna build that flagpole," Doak says. "So why shouldn't it be Columbia Falls?"

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