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A Stroll Through Bell Station

By Glynis Hart
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Around 45 people showed up on a bright, clear Saturday morning to take a hike on the NYSEG property north of the power plant on Cayuga Lake. Organized by the Friends of Bell Station, the hike was meant to introduce local people to the Bell Station property, in hopes that it will some day become the property of New York State for the purpose of preserving open space.

In meetings with the public, DEC Regional Coordinator Ken Lynch has emphasized that they are only beginning to negotiate with Iberdrola, the

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Spanish company that now owns NYSEG, and that it may take a long time before anything happens with the land. The DEC would like to preserve the property as a state wildlife management area, in keeping with their Open Space Conservation plan, which “will ensure that resources for open space conservation are committed to publicly identified priorities.”

However, local residents and business owners are excited about the possibility of adding the lakeshore property to the local roster of green spaces. The Lansing town board passed a resolution in 2013 in favor of turning the land into State-owned forest or wildlife management, with the codicil that any such preserve would contribute a payment in lieu of taxes to the town.

Hikers, snowshoers, birdwatchers and even a few intrepid paddleboarders braved the cold weather to take a look at Bell Station, which is normally closed to the public.

Jennifer Miller, of Paddle-N-More, led a group of paddleboarders up the lake from near the power station. Although it was cold, the wind was still and the lake calm. Flocks of waterfowl, who gather near the outflow of the streams on Bell Station, moved a safe distance away, while a few students from SUNY Cortland hauled a table to the shore and set up hot drinks and snacks for the hikers.

The birdwatchers’ group reported seeing two immature bald eagles.

Other hikers noted the diversity of tree species on the property, and the presence of the Tully limestone. This super-hard layer of limestone dates from the Devonian geologic age and also breaks the surface across the lake, at the

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falls in lower Taughannock Park by Rt. 89.

"Where you see the Tully, you see waterfalls," said Roger Hopkins, a waterfall enthusiast. Sure enough, one of three creeks running through the property – and the only one that doesn't disappear seasonally – flows over a shelf of Tully limestone, forming a nice waterfall.

White and red oaks shared space with numerous other tree species and shrubs. The understory appeared healthy and free of the overbrowsing by whitetail deer that has devastated saplings and shrubs in much of Lansing and the parks closer to Ithaca. Cedars grew on the bluffs overlooking the lake.

While some of the trees are quite old, rusted cattle fencing staggered through the woods and some invasive species, such as buckthorn, have made inroads. A good part of the property is still being farmed- about 200 acres and still more of it appears to have once been farmed, and the forest has been periodically logged. Three gorges trisect the property, possibly posing a barrier to development, and of course the power plant is directly South. A few residents who live close to the property opined that the parcel is too far away from population centers to be of much interest to developers, while others said its best use would be as a repository for native plant species. Until the deer browse problem in the rest of the county is solved, local tree populations are losing ground because the deer eat the saplings before they can mature.

"It could be an invaluable teaching tool," said one former geology professor. "With those three little gorges, you could show students the different rock formations in a small place."

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The mood on the shore after everyone finished their hikes was hope-filled.

John Dennis, of the Environmental Management Council for Tompkins County, gave a short speech on the history of the property. Jennifer Miller, who led the cohort paddling up the lake, thanked everyone for coming and was thanked in return for her work organizing the event.

Then the paddlers stepped back onto their wet boards and went serenely back down the lake, while the hikers went back to the bus.

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