

OUR VIEW: Preserve the Ravenna Flagpole flagpole rerieved, but more community support is needed

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The 150-foot tall flag-pole that has towered over downtown Ravenna for nearly 120 years is an iconic and patriotic presence, a unique structure visible for miles that is identified with the community. It's also a work of 19th Century art that was an engineering marvel when it was erected.

The fate of the flagpole appeared to be in question after Ravenna Township trustees, who own it, found themselves facing concerns about its stability. A preliminary estimate called for nearly \$250,000 in repairs. Acting on the evidence presented, the trustees seemed ready to dismantle the flagpole.

Friends of the Flagpole, a grassroots preservationist group, led by Jack Schafer and Peggy DiPaola, formed in an effort to save the structure. The group researched the history of the pole and amassed a body of evidence attesting to its historical significance -- including the fact that it was one of the tallest structures in Ohio when it was constructed in 1893. Determined not to see the community icon toppled, they set about to save it, and mounted a drive for funds to underwrite that effort.

Enlisting community support, Friends of the Flagpole have raised more than \$70,000, with more potential pledges pending. That's roughly half of the \$150,000 they estimate it will cost refurbish the flagpole and install other improvements, such as lighting and security measures to deter climbers from scaling the structure.

The township trustees, to their credit, have recognized the preservationists' good faith efforts to save the flagpole and have decided to reprove it.

That's welcome news. The flagpole is an important element of downtown Ravenna, one that would be sorely missed if it wasn't around. Seeing it dismantled would be a sad spectacle, one made even sadder because the community is losing another landmark, the 1923 Ravenna High School building, which is in the process of being demolished.

The proposal presented to the trustees by Friends of the Flagpole calls for Spensiere LLC, which is based in Syracuse, N.Y., to dismantle the pole to repair it, ship it back to Ravenna and reassemble it. The estimated cost for the restoration effort is significantly less than the \$250,000 estimate the trustees weighed following the structural analysis last year.

There are other issues that need to be resolved, including the ownership of the flagpole, which is within Ravenna Township's jurisdiction because the township was the governmental entity responsible for its erection. Joint ownership of the flagpole by the city of Ravenna, the township and Portage County would be the ideal solution, we believe.

The flagpole has had its detractors from the first time Old Glory was hoisted there on Memorial Day 1893 -- some said it looked like an oil derrick -- and it also has been the target of previous efforts to dismantle it, most notably in the early 1960s when the present Portage County Courthouse was constructed. It has withstood its critics and those who have threatened its existence in the past, and now it appears that its future is secure.

We commend the Ravenna Township trustees for recognizing the need to preserve it. We also commend Friends of the Flagpole for rallying community support and, even more importantly, coming up with a solution -- and a significant amount of money -- to save it. More money is needed. We urge Portage County residents to support efforts to save a landmark that is symbolic not only of Ravenna but the county as a whole.

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