

## Section 17: A welcome place, but not open space

Over the years, many Flagstaff residents have enjoyed the natural beauty of the scenic plot of land known as Section 17, located behind the Mars Hill campus of Lowell Observatory. Percival Lowell, a founder and early President of the Appalachian Mountain Club, enjoyed hiking outdoors and the beauty of the forests here on the Colorado Plateau. Today, Lowell Observatory continues the practice of welcoming locals to hike and recreate on what is, formally, private property, and its continuation of this practice, even while the observatory has been closed during the pandemic, has provided solace to many.

Section 17 has garnered increasing attention in recent months, largely due to misperceptions about the nature and purpose of the land. One of these misperceptions--that Section 17 is open space--was further circulated this week by an Arizona Daily Sun article entitled, "As Lowell Observatory looks to the future, some worry the public won't have a say." As Sole Trustee of the Observatory it is my job to look out for the future of the institution and its place in the community of Flagstaff. To that end, I would like to correct some of those misperceptions.

None of the land we own, including Section 17, is "open space." It is privately owned, but we have welcomed the public to its trails because we view that as being a good neighbor.

Section 17 was granted to Percival Lowell by an Act of Congress in 1910. There is a restriction on the land that requires that it must be used for "...observatory purposes *in connection with Lowell Observatory. (emphasis added)*", or the land would revert to the government. This phrasing is open to interpretation, and Congress made no provision for how to determine what are acceptable "purposes."

Over the past century, the land has been used for a number of purposes including a radio relay tower, the Snowbowl pipeline with hydrants for fire defense of the Observatory and the west side of Flagstaff, a squirrel habitat survey area, a right of way for a FUTS segment, and an observing dome that has been converted to visitor living space. These are diverse uses. All these uses have benefited the community; only the last one directly served the Observatory and its mission. A FUTS segment, for example, may not be directly aligned with the Observatory's mission, but it certainly serves a positive purpose by contributing to the quality of life in the city of which the Observatory is a part.

For many years, it has made sense to keep the land as a buffer from any development interfering with science operations at the Observatory. With the City of Flagstaff's purchase of the open space land further west, this is no longer a concern. The lack of clarity and lack of administrative process to determine acceptable uses is why the Observatory is requesting new language from Congress.

When Section 17 was granted to the Observatory, it was outside the Flagstaff city limits and there was no development oversight except for the Federal Government. Today, it is part of the City of Flagstaff, classified as Rural Residential, and subject to all the public review processes of any other privately owned land. This means any development on Section 17 must be reviewed by the City (and with community input) *before* any work can be done, *regardless* of the congressional language.

There is a defined method for engaging with the community in an open and transparent way. That is why we proposed to the Flagstaff City Council a Master Plan process in a public-private partnership with

the City. This will ensure that everyone will have an opportunity to contribute ideas and be informed before any work is started. It is a rare opportunity for any community.

Lowell Observatory has closely partnered with the Flagstaff community for more than 125 years. We look forward to continuing that relationship into the future. It has been good for Lowell and, we trust, for Flagstaff; we hope and intend it will always be so. And, to be clear, any plan developed will include hiking trails among the ponderosas that will be open to the public. We enjoy walking in the woods, too.

W. Lowell Putnam, Sole Trustee