



## Older Bitterroot ski club members urge compromise on Gordon Reese Cabin

6 HOURS AGO • PERRY BACKUS RAVALLI REPUBLIC

A former president of the Bitterroot Cross Country Ski Club thinks the U.S. Forest Service shouldn't be the only one willing to compromise when it comes to management of a popular ski hut at Chief Joseph Pass.

In a letter that he recently sent to members of the club last week, Sonny LaSalle urged them to vote to continue its partnership with the agency to maintain the Gordon Reese Cabin.

The future of that relationship has been up in the air following a controversy over the agency's decision to place the cabin's winter rental use under a national reservation system.

Current ski club president Mike Hoyt and others have maintained that the club donated the building to the Forest Service under an agreement that it would remain open and free to the public for use.

Club members voted earlier to discontinue their volunteer host services after learning about the agency's decision to start renting it in the winter.

In his letter to the membership, LaSalle said the information disseminated about the situation hasn't been completely accurate.

A retired Forest Service supervisor, LaSalle served as club president for six years starting in 1999.

"I'm one of the people who helped build this," LaSalle said in an interview. "My preference would have been to keep it free to the public, but I understand exactly where Dave (Myers) is coming from."

Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest Supervisor Myers made the decision to place the cabin on the national reservation system following a ruling by the USDA Office of Ethics in Arlington, Va., which said the club's method of allocating its host nights was viewed as preferential treatment.

LaSalle said the Forest Service has a congressional mandate to use the national reservation system for its rentals.

The cabin has been rented in the summer since it was built in 2001 by the club, but was offered free to people who agreed to serve as hosts in the winter months. The club raised more than \$100,000 to help pay for the construction.

Each winter, it spends about \$10,000 to keep the ski trails around the cabin groomed.

When the cabin was built, LaSalle said Wisdom District Ranger Dennis Havig promised he would do what he could to keep it off the national reservation system.

LaSalle said, and Havig concurred in a telephone interview, that there was never a written agreement that the arrangement would continue forever.

"Dennis said he would do what he could do and he did," LaSalle said. "Budgets went down and personnel changed and this happened."

Havig has since retired and now lives just outside of Wisdom.

"I always told that group that times change and people change," Havig said. "I told them that this was the way we would do it today, but if it doesn't work, I reserved the right to change it."

When the Forest Service took ownership of the cabin, Havig said that it was clear that the agency would have take responsibility for management of the structure.

"At one time, I proposed charging for overnight visitors," Havig said. "At the time, the agency didn't need the money so we didn't have an argument for additional revenue. I let it go and tried to keep it free."

"Once again, times change in the world," Havig said.

The club has always had high-energy and demanding members, Havig said.

"Sometimes the Forest Service and club's objectives didn't match," he said. "We always figured a way to work it out. I have confidence they can do it again."

Gordon Reese certainly hopes so.

One of the ski club's founders, Reese worked with the Forest Service in the 1990s to establish the ski area and eventually build the warming hut which bears his name.

Reese said Friday that the split now occurring in the club nearly makes him weep.

There's a new group forming called Friends of the Ski Hut, which is made up mostly of ski club members who don't want to give up their volunteer efforts to maintain the Gordon Reese Cabin.

"We're not going to just sit back and let the cabin get rundown and go to pieces," Reese said. "It's beyond disturbing to me. It's really crushing to think that something that has gone on for 11 years and viewed so positively by so many people could end up like this."