A Towering Task

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HARRISONBURG - Harrisonburg has a new temporary addition to its skyline.

For the next month, patrons of businesses at the Ice House complex and those traveling on Liberty Street can view a scale model of the Eiffel Tower jutting above Pale Fire Brewing Co. The 32-foot-tall black structure evokes the same shape as the Parisian landmark, with strings of solar-powered LED lights draped around its frame and a bright yellow sunflower held aloft on a flag.

Volunteers from various churches and organizations, such as the New Community Project Vine and Fig and Climate Action Alliance of the Valley, built and painted the tower Saturday and raised it onto the brewery's balcony Monday afternoon.

Harrisonburg is among hundreds of cities across the world joining together to send a message to leaders at a summit in Paris next week "to say we need action on climate now," Tom Benevento said.

"We need to begin to turn off fossil fuels and turn on renewable energy," he said.

From Nov. 30 to Dec. 11, leaders from nearly 200 countries will meet in Paris for the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference to achieve a legally binding and universal agreement on climate.

According to 350.org, a group dedicated to addressing global climate change, the conference will mark the biggest gathering of its kind since 2009.

The group calls for U.N. leaders to commit to keeping at least 80 percent of fossil fuels - which include coal, oil and natural gas - underground and financing a "just transition" to 100 percent renewable energy by 2050.

Benevento, 53, of Harrisonburg, co-director of Vine and Fig, said organizers built the miniature Eiffel Tower to call attention to climate change as "humanity's most urgent issue."

"If we don't deal with it now, then we can't get the [carbon dioxide] out of the atmosphere," he said. "And once it's in there, it's in there for tens of hundreds of years - thousands of years, actually, is what the scientists are saying."

Johann Zimmermann, 59, an engineer with JZ Engineering in the city, helped design and construct the tower.

At 32 1/2 feet tall, each foot of the replica is equal to about 10 meters of the actual Eiffel Tower, he said.

He said the biggest challenge in building the tower was bending the PVC pipes that compose it.

"[It takes] a lot of muscle, and you don't want to bend them too far or else they break," he said. "In the cold it's even worse, so that was my biggest design challenge was that we can bend the PVC without it becoming brittle and breaking."

Although the idea for the tower began about 2 1/2 weeks ago - before the Nov. 13 terrorist attacks in Paris - Zimmermann said it also serves as a memoriam to the lives lost in the attacks. "So, it's taken on a double meaning," he said.

Organizers will turn on the tower's lights at their "Postcard to Paris" ceremony at 4:30 p.m. Sunday. The event will include live music, a series of speeches and refreshments.

Visitors at the ceremony can also write on a giant postcard calling for a shift to renewable energy sources and sign a petition urging Harrisonburg City Council to adopt environmental performance standards.

As the roughly 15 volunteers finished hoisting the tower on Monday, Pamela Cook rushed to her minivan and honked the horn in celebration.

Cook, 62, of Harrisonburg, said she came to watch the tower being raised and support the call for more renewables.

"You know, if we can do all this fancy stuff with cellphones," she said, "surely we should be able to do something better with energy."

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