

West Essex Tribune, October 8, 2015

Livingston Residents Work to Ensure "Children May Always Play" on Eagle Island

Livingston residents Paula McGovern, Carole Mackenzie and Lyn Vossler have been working to make sure that "Children May Always Play" on Eagle Island, a former Girl Scout camp located in Upper Saranac Lake, New York. All three serve on the Board of Friends of Eagle Island, Inc. (FEI), which recently announced that it has reached an agreement to purchase the island from the Girl Scouts Heart of New Jersey Council by the end of October.

The Friends of Eagle Island was able to make the purchase through the "extraordinary generosity" of an anonymous donor.

McGovern noted that for many the story has become, "Who is the donor?" But in her opinion, the story is about a beloved camp and what can happen with the perseverance of volunteers. Friends of Eagle Island, Inc., was formed as a non-profit organization dedicated to purchasing and resuming operations on the Eagle Island property "as a place of learning and adventure for young people."

Six years and one lawsuit later, the group has succeeded in the first part of its mission. Eagle Island, which served as an active Girl Scout camp from 1937 until 2008, will remain a place of "learning and adventure."

Dorcas R. Hardy, president of the Friends of Eagle Island, said, "We are absolutely delighted with this outcome and the opportunity to conserve Eagle Island, preserve the historic landmark buildings, and restore the property for youth camping and the public. We are grateful to the generosity of our donor and appreciate the willingness of the Girl Scouts to work with us to achieve this worthwhile purpose."

The island has an interesting history. In 1910, Levi Morton, former United States Vice President and governor of New York, sold Eagle Island and its related properties, including two small islands and a mainland "base" on Gilpin Bay, to Henry Graves, Jr., a New Jersey industrialist. In 1937, Graves and his wife, Florence, donated Eagle Island to the Girl Scouts of the Oranges, New Jersey, to "keep the spirit of childhood alive" after the tragic deaths of their two sons.

The Girl Scouts operated Camp Eagle Island for 70 years, providing high adventure, wilderness and sailing programs to thousands of girls and young women. Following a series of Girl Scout council consolidations, new leadership initiatives by the National Girl Scouts and financial needs of the local council, Girl Scouts Heart of New Jersey

discontinued Eagle Island's use as camp and decided to sell the island in 2010.

This decision was a great disappointment to the campers, camp counselors, alumnae, and the Graves family and sparked the formation of Friends of Eagle Island. This group, along with others, set out to preserve the 70 year legacy for future generations. McGovern is treasurer of the group's Board; Mackenzie is assistant treasurer; and Vossler is a Board member.

The camp has personal connections for all three women. Each of their daughters attended the camp. In addition, Vossler and McGovern were Eagle Island campers themselves.

With the upcoming purchase, the group has achieved its goal of making sure that the island will be used as intended by its former owner, not to develop housing or for any other purpose.

The camp will no longer be limited to Girl Scouts. The Friends of Eagle Island's vision for the future includes sharing Eagle Island more broadly to make the island an integral asset of the Adirondack Park and Upper Saranac Lake community. Plans under discussion include providing public access through visitation and recreational use, historic preservation tours, environmental education for children and families, and by hosting public events and programs in its expansive interior and exterior spaces.

While ideas continue to bloom for what can be done with the island, the next matter of business is the closing process, said McGovern. In addition, the group is currently raising funds for major renovations including water, electrical and sewer work. Many other renovations and repairs will be needed to get the camp up and running once more.

The unique island presents its own unique set of challenges for work crews and volunteers. It is only accessible by boat in the summer. McGovern notes that one could drive to the island in the winter if brave enough to maneuver across the ice. FEI now has a barge which can transport large items.

The group is hoping to phase in youth camping in the summer of 2017.

For more information and opportunities to support the Friends of Eagle Island, go to www.friendsofeagleisland.org.