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Santa Clara OKs youth camp use at Eagle Island

Friends of Eagle Island move ahead with plans to renovate, update historic site, outdoor youth camping would resume in 2018

BY **KIM DEDAM**

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Photo provided via Friends of Eagle Island

Summer porch rustica at the Main Lodge on Eagle Island. Town councilors in Santa Clara approved zoning amendment allowing Friends of Eagle Island to resume camp use on the historic property.

UPPER SARANAC LAKE — The return of outdoor camping on historic Eagle Island won a big land-use victory last week.

Santa Clara's Town Council approved Friends of Eagle Island's request for an amendment to local land use law, which curtailed any camp development beyond those currently in use on and around the town's pristine Adirondack lakes.

Eagle Island occupies about 29 acres on a heart-shaped, wooded island near Gilpin Bay on Upper Saranac Lake.

An historic Great Camp complex built for former New York Governor and U.S. Vice President Levi P. Morton, it was run as a Girl Scout camp without interruption for 70 years before administrators at Girl Scouts Heart of New Jersey shuttered it in 2009 with campers lined up to go. The group had just completed financial restructuring and cited budget concerns.

The Girl Scout organization put the island and its historic buildings up for sale a year later.

Friends of Eagle Island formed as a non-profit and worked diligently through lengthy court proceedings in Franklin County to bid for and buy the property.

They prevailed in September 2015 having raised funds to secure the reported \$2.4 million purchase.

All of the organizers and members of the Friends are former girl scouts or family of former scouts who attended camp on the island.

Their dream of rebuilding Eagle Island, which is named as a National Historic Landmark, faced updated town zoning law that limits summer camp development.

Though used for summer outdoor educational programs for 71 years, the property had sat unused by Girl Scouts for almost nine years.

"This action puts (Friends of Eagle Island) and Eagle Island one step closer to its goal of instituting camp in 2018 and opens many doors for fund development and future partnerships," Friends President Chris Wubbolding said in a news release.

"While there is still major work to be done and funds to be raised in 2017, we are thrilled to have started out the New Year with such good news."

The group also won significant state economic development monies on Dec. 8 with a \$498,825 grant award from the North Country Regional Economic Development Council to rehabilitate camp infrastructure.

"This grant, combined with the continued generous financial contributions from our supporters, brings us even closer to realizing our goal of reestablishing Eagle Island as a youth camp," Paula McGovern, the Friends Executive Director, said last month.

Upper Saranac Lake residents and former campers addressed the Santa Clara board at a public comment session on Dec. 8.

Speakers who urged the town to move forward with the zoning amendment included Susan Moody; former APA Chairman and Upper Saranac Lake resident Curt Stiles; Adirondack historian Mary Hotaling, who is founder of Historic Saranac Lake; Steven Englehart of Adirondack Architectural Heritage and Laura Parmington, a former camper and counselor, among several others.

According to minutes from the meeting, resident Michelle Brown did ask why Friends did not need to apply for a variance with the planning board.

Santa Clara Supervisor Marcel "Mickey" Webb said there are two ways to address zoning code changes: "One is to apply for a variance and the other is to apply to amend the Land Use Code (law). Friends chose to apply for an amendment," Webb said.

As part of the decision, Friends of Eagle Island "must resume such uses within two years from the date of adoption of the Town Council Resolution," according to language in the resolution.

That time frame "may be extended for one additional year for good cause shown by application to the Town Board and a Resolution of the Town Board approving such extension, without requirement for a Public Hearing on such extension."

Friends Treasurer and Vice-President Carol McKenzie shared maps of tent platforms, the beach area and common buildings, indicating low-impact camping use has long been the tradition of outdoor and environmental programs at Eagle Island. The property has a rustic design boathouse that was updated within the last 30 years.

In a message sent to organization members, Wubbolding, the Friends president, outlined what is next for 2017.

"We will be contracting major projects: upgraded/new water supply system off the lake, electrical repairs and upgrades, two large roof replacements and foundation work," she said.

An historic treasure, several of the original buildings at Camp Eagle Island were designed by the renowned Adirondack architect William L. Coulter and built for Morton in 1903.

Its main dining room, Great Room, walkways, railings and guest cabins contain some of the most exemplary elements of turn-of-the-century rustic design still in existence today.

"Eagle Island retains an extremely high level of integrity, setting, plan, design, style, materials and method of construction and is considered the finest example of the work of (Coulter)," the nomination file for Historic Register recounts.

The Girl Scouts owned and operated the property since 1938, a gift for \$1 from the camp's second owners, Henry Graves Jr. whose family suffered the tragic loss of two sons.

The gift to the scouting organization even then required the property to be used forever to benefit children.

For more information, visit friendsofeagleisland.org.

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