

Adirondack Daily Enterprise

Repairing Eagle Island's wings

Group aims to reopen summer camp for girls in 2019



Volunteers gather in front of Eagle Island's main lodge on Friday, Aug. 18. (Photo provided by Eagle Island Inc.)

UPPER SARANAC LAKE — The Girl Scouts operated Camp Eagle Island continuously for 70 years, from 1938 to 2008. For the last year-and-a-half, Eagle Island Inc. has been working to restore its historic buildings for a future youth summer camp.

There is no formal time frame for improvements, but the goal is to open some private family camps there next summer, with the youth girls camp

opening in the summer of 2019.

Eagle Island, a 10-minute boat ride from the mainland in Upper Saranac Lake, will be a traditional Adirondack-style camp. It will offer sailing, canoeing, overnight camping, hiking, daily swimming and outdoor-inspired STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) programs. Girls will be able to learn about the environment while living in a platform tent for two weeks at a time.

Paula Michelsen McGovern, executive director of Eagle Island Inc., officially started the nonprofit group with other alumni and friends of the old Girl Scout camp in 2011. Originally named Friends of Eagle Island Inc., the group changed its name in 2017 to be more inclusive. Michelsen McGovern's original goal was to help the Girl Scouts reopen the camp, but when that didn't work, she focused on opening the camp to operate in much of the same way it had before. Eagle Island Inc. purchased the island in November 2015 from the Girl Scouts Heart of New Jersey Council for \$2.45 million, thanks to an anonymous donor.

There are many repairs to do before the camp can open, though.



Hannah Grill cuts wood for the shower house floor earlier this month on Eagle Island. (Photo provided by Eagle Island Inc.)

Michelsen McGovern said the building complex, constructed in 1903, maintains its character from architect William L. Coulter.

“The Girl Scouts did not do much to the buildings,” Michelsen McGovern said. “They did not tear down walls and put up Sheetrock. The buildings look much the same as they did in the ’30s, which is pretty incredible.”

Michelsen McGovern said her group is not adding buildings or completely tearing down any. She said there’s still work to do on foundations and roofs, including on the dining hall and kitchen. Boathouse restoration is still in progress. Michelsen McGovern said there is no need for additional furnishing since many of the original benches, animal heads and tables from 1903 are still in good condition. She said the camp will look similar to the way it was.

The camp still needs a new water supply system and a updated septic system. Michelsen McGovern said the electrical wiring is in the best shape

of all the camp's systems and had little done to it. She said they are almost ready to go out to bid on the water system.

Eagle Island is a 30-acre property designed for Levi Morton, a former New York governor, U.S. representative and vice president under President Benjamin Harrison. The National Register of Historic Places recognized the camp in 1986, and in 2004 the property was named a National Historic Landmark.



Paula Michelsen McGovern, center, executive director of Eagle Island Inc., directs volunteers on shingling the roof of a workshop that was built in 1903 on Eagle Island. (Photo provided by Eagle Island Inc.)

“They hired architects to give them good advice to treat the buildings properly with preservation, and they are selectively hiring good people in the right skills and experience,” said Steven Engelhart, executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, a Keeseville-based historical preservation group that has made suggestions along the way to Eagle Island Inc.

All this work is expensive. Eagle Island Inc. is still looking to raise \$2 million to complete renovations, and it has already gotten help from grants. In December 2016, when a contingent from the North Country accepted a \$61.4 million package of Regional Economic Development Council grants from the state, Eagle Island Inc. was awarded \$498,825. The group also received \$20,000 from the private Cloudsplitter Foundation last year, and again this year, and \$10,000 last October through the National Trust for Historic Preservation from the Hart Family Fund for Small Towns. [Editor's note: An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated the amount of the Cloudsplitter Foundation grants.]

Eagle Island Inc. has also received six 15-foot sailboats, donated in memory of a former camper and Eagle Island board member, and has accepted donations of kayaks, canoes, supplies and tools.

Volunteers helped this summer on repairs, sleeping on the island or staying nearby. Eagle Island Inc. is winding down on accepting volunteers for this year, but people interested can go to the website to sign up. There's work left to do until Labor Day, from shingling to painting to blowing pine needles off roofs.

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