

Saratogian News: Mount McGregor prison property to join Moreau Lake State Park

By: Paul Post

3/2/2015

Moreau Lake State Park will acquire the former Mount McGregor prison property, the Peebles Island State Park's collection of writings and artwork will be digitized, Thacher Park will get a new visitors center, and upgrades are slated for Saratoga Spa State Park's Victoria Pool — all part of a \$900 million capital investment outlined Monday by state parks Commissioner Rose Harvey.

"We're not just fixing, improving and enhancing," she said. "We're transforming. We are going to change the state parks system. We're going to modernize it and make it more relevant for the 21st century." Developing the 1,200-acre prison site for recreational purposes is a long-term process that will require study, analysis and a detailed master plan, Harvey said during a visit to Saratoga Spa State Park, where she outlined capital spending planned for parks statewide by 2020.

Saratoga Spa State Park alone will get \$7 million, with some visible changes expected this year, including a new picnic pavilion, trails, Lincoln and Roosevelt bathhouse upgrades and improvements to the Victoria Pool. Plans call for remaking a Geyser Creek comfort station into a children's classroom that hosts nature programs, possibly by summer 2016.

Advertisement

The Capital-Saratoga Region encompasses 20 parks, campgrounds and historic sites.

There has been considerable speculation about the future of Mount McGregor since its medium-security prison closed last summer.

"It is in the works," Harvey said of the impending land transfer. "We're very optimistic. There's just a lot of process. I don't know how long it will take. We're really happy with what we believe will be the conclusion. We're adding really natural beautiful lands that make the connection to different parts of Moreau state park."

The mountaintop property is in the towns of Moreau, Wilton and Corinth.

The parks system is still working with the state Department of Corrections to make sure historic Grant Cottage, located atop Mount McGregor, has adequate water, sewer, heat and electrical service for the upcoming 2015 tourist season. The building where President Ulysses S. Grant died is adjacent to the former prison.

Regional Parks Commissioner Heather Mabee said there are many possible uses for the prison property, which includes several lakes. One lake was a popular swimming area before the site became a prison.

“There’s a ton of ideas,” she said. “We really can’t do anything until that land is actually in our hands and we develop a master plan for it.”

Empire State Development is charged with marketing the former prison’s 71 buildings. To date, no proposals have been announced.

Most of Harvey’s presentation dealt with broad themes for the parks system such as increased recreational use, protecting art and culture, and using parks to promote local economies through special events. Spa State Park alone hosts 60 athletic races each year with 21,000 participants.

However, she also touched on specific projects at various different parks. Plans are in the works for a new visitors center at Thacher Park in the Helderbergs featuring exhibits that describe the site’s natural and geologic history.

Mabee said Peebles Island State Park’s entire collection of writings, paintings and Civil War flags, in Waterford, is being digitized to make it more accessible to the public. New income-generating camper cabins are planned for Moreau Lake State Park.

The state has been allocating \$9 million per year since 2011 for parks capital projects. Some work has already been done such as a \$4.2 million investment at Staatsburgh State Historic Site in Dutchess County. This included rebuilding the estate’s 100-year-old crumbling stone wall, refurbishing 16-foot high wrought iron gates, and repairing the mansion’s leaky roof.

In Central New York, a new bathhouse was built at Verona Beach State Park on the eastern shore of Oneida Lake. Like all new parks buildings, it has environmentally friendly energy-efficient features.

Harvey said \$850 million of the \$900 million earmarked for capital spending is state money, with the rest a combination of private and federal dollars. Many “Friends” groups have raised money to support projects for their respective parks in the face of state belt-tightening in recent years.

Many parks were faced with cutbacks and possible closure only a few years ago.

Staffing shortages are still a problem because there has been no increase in operational budgets, despite more money for capital projects. More than half of all capital money will be used for park infrastructure such as roads, bridges, parking areas, clean water and restrooms, Harvey said.

