

Times Union: Former Mount McGregor prison grounds to become parkland

By: Rick Karlin

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A 750-acre parcel of forest that used to be part of the now-closed Mount McGregor prison complex in Saratoga County will be used as parkland, with the land going to the adjacent Moreau State Park.

This had been sought and hinted at earlier, but now it's official. As for the buildings and another 325 acres, the state's Empire State Development agency will be seeking bids from people who may want to redevelop the site.

Here are details along with some happy quotes:

For the park:

The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (State Parks) today announced that 750 acres of the former Mount McGregor State Correctional Facility property in Saratoga County will be transferred to Moreau Lake State Park. A map identifying the new parkland is attached.

"I'm thrilled that New York State will open these 750 acres of beautiful forested land to the public for outdoor recreation," said State Parks Commissioner Rose Harvey.

"Moreau Lake State Park is visited by hundreds of thousands of outdoor enthusiasts each year for camping, swimming and exploring its popular trail network. Adding this land to the park will greatly expand the recreational opportunities in the region, preserve open space in fast-growing Saratoga County and ensure access to the Grant Cottage State Historic Site."

The new park lands, located in the towns of Corinth, Wilton and Moreau, include extensive forests and wetlands and the shores of Lake Bonita, a scenic undeveloped lake. The transfer extends the park's protection of a mountain ridge known as the Palmertown Range and includes a key segment of a planned long-distance Palmertown Ridge Trail that eventually will connect Saratoga Springs to Moreau Lake.

State Parks will undertake a public planning effort in the coming months to give the public an opportunity to comment on how best to provide recreational access to the new parkland, which will include creation of hiking trails and access to Lake Bonita. Public access to the property is currently limited with no parking areas or maintained trails.

The lands transferred to State Parks also include Grant Cottage State Historic Site, the site where President Ulysses S. Grant died in July 1885. General Grant spent the last five weeks of his life at the cottage, writing his memoirs while battling cancer. The Cottage became an historic site in 1890 and today the cottage remains essentially the same as during the Grant family's stay. Visitors can tour the downstairs of the cottage, viewing the original furnishings, decorations and personal items belonging to Grant,

including the bed where he died, and floral arrangements that remain from Grant's August 4th funeral. The site opens for the season Memorial Day weekend.

The reuse of the full 1,025-acre former Mount McGregor Correctional Facility property is being coordinated by Empire State Development and the Office of General Services. Empire State Development President, CEO & Commissioner Howard Zensky said, "By working in collaboration with our partner agencies, the New York State Office of General Services and New York State Parks, we have been able to realize a unique approach for the reuse of the Mount McGregor facility that addresses both an opportunity for private investment and public uses. The transfer of hundreds of acres of land to Moreau Lake State Park will no doubt draw visitors and help boost the tourism economy in Saratoga County, while offering more open space for residents to enjoy outdoor recreational activities."

"Governor Cuomo has made it a priority to encourage visitors and residents to enjoy all our state has to offer, especially our rich history and glorious parks," Office of General Services Commissioner RoAnn Destito said. "Adding this acreage to Moreau Lake State Park and ensuring access to historic Grant Cottage will open up even more ways for families to see and enjoy New York."

"The transfer of 750 acres of land to Moreau Lake State Park is good news as it will enhance and expand access to hiking trails and other outdoor recreational activities. Most important, it will ensure the continued operation of Grant's Cottage, a historic site and popular local attraction, and that it is cared for and maintained under the close, careful supervision of the State Parks Department," said New York State Senator Kathy Marchione, Chair of the Senate's Local Government Committee.

"The addition of Mount McGregor to Moreau State Park will make an already beautiful asset even more appealing," said Senator Betty Little, who chairs the Senate Cultural Affairs, Tourism and Parks and Recreation Committee. "That's great news for area residents looking to enjoy the outdoors and for the region, which depends a great deal on a strong tourism economy."

"These lands will be a wonderful addition to our State park system, and will provide environmental, recreational and tourism-related benefits for the region," said Senator Hugh T. Farley. "I applaud the efforts of the Governor and his state agencies in working with local officials and organizations to ensure the preservation and public use of these wild lands, while also taking steps to find productive uses for the facility campus which will benefit the local economy."

"The publication of this Request for Proposal is a key step to ensuring an expeditious transition from correctional facility to new development that will benefit the residents of Saratoga County and our neighboring regions," said Assemblywoman Carrie Woerner. "I look forward to partnering with Empire State Development, as well as other state agencies, municipalities, and community stakeholders, to maximize the potential of the Mount McGregor site."

Assemblyman Daniel Stec said, "I am pleased to see this proposal moving forward. The environmental, historical and economic benefits this project offers to the community are very positive."

Wilton Town Supervisor Art Johnson said, "I'm pleased that ESD has released the RFP for the sale and redevelopment of Mount McGregor, and that undeveloped lands will be added to Moreau Lake State Park. This is a very desirable site that should bring lots of interest. There are many potential reuses for the property. I especially look forward to replacing the many jobs lost with the closure."

"Our board has been very supportive of creating more parkland and trails," said Moreau Town Supervisor Preston Jenkins, Jr. "We're very happy the land will be used for expanding Moreau Lake State Park. It's one of the best State Parks in the nation." "I'm glad to be part of a partnership to develop new lands that can be accessed by the public, and that the public will have a say in how the park is used," said Town of Corinth Supervisor Richard Lucia. "We look forward to working with the community on this project."

"The designation of a portion of the former McGregor Prison lands as permanent parkland is an outstanding gift to the people of New York State," said Maria Trabka, Executive Director of Saratoga PLAN. "The Palmertown Range is a jewel in northern Saratoga County, a 62-square mile complex of wild woodlands and wetlands, providing environmental services like clean air and water and wildlife habitats, while offering ample opportunities for compatible public access and outdoor recreation close to local population centers."

"Congratulations to the Cuomo administration for their commitment to protecting the natural and historic resources located on the grounds of Mount McGregor. For more than 20 years OSI has worked with State Parks to build and expand Moreau Lake State Park," said Kim Elliman, president and CEO of the Open Space Institute.

"Transformation of Mount McGregor into a protected recreational asset will not only greatly serve the residents of Saratoga County, but also advances our shared vision of connecting Moreau Lake and Saratoga Spa State Parks."

"Audubon New York commends Governor Cuomo and Commissioner Harvey for expanding the Moreau Lake State Park and ensuring the protection of this critical forest habitat," said Erin Crotty, Executive Director of Audubon New York. "The Southern Adirondack Audubon Society has been a leading voice for protecting this Important Bird Area, and we applaud all the partners who worked to ensure these acres are permanently preserved."

The additional park acreage underscores Governor Cuomo's commitment to improving and expanding access to outdoor recreation. NY Parks 2020 is a multi-year commitment to leverage a broad range of private and public funding to invest approximately \$900 million in State Parks from 2011 to 2020. The 2015-16 State Budget includes \$110 million toward this initiative.

Moreau Lake State Park is a 4,531-acre park that attracts almost 400,000 people each year as a destination for swimming, kayaking, wildlife viewing, hiking, fishing, hunting and more. The park's Nature Center provides educational programming for park visitors and local students throughout the summer months.

With its proximity to both Lake George and Saratoga Springs, the park is attractive to visitors year-round as it offers ice fishing, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and other winter activities. In recent years the park has become a very popular destination for bald eagle watching in the cold winter months, when eagles winter along the shores of Moreau Lake itself, or along the Hudson River, which runs along the west side of the park property.

Here are more details about the redevelopment efforts:

Empire State Development (ESD) today announced it will issue a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the purchase and redevelopment of approximately 325 acres of the former Mount McGregor Correctional Facility located in Wilton, New York. Mount McGregor closed in July 2014 as part of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo's initiative to save New York taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars by consolidating the state's correctional facilities based on a declining inmate population.

The RFP will be available on ESD's website at esd.ny.gov/CorporateInformation/RFPs.html on Tuesday, May 5 with responses due Tuesday, July 7, 2015. Redevelopment plans should maximize the economic benefit to the Towns of Corinth, Moreau, and Wilton, Saratoga County and the State.

"We have worked closely with local and community stakeholders to issue an RFP that will provide the opportunity to generate new employment and private investment in Saratoga County," said ESD President, CEO & Commissioner Howard Zemsky. "We look forward to seeing responses that propose uses for the property that will create new jobs and stimulate economic activity in the local municipality and throughout the region." "Finding new uses for state properties that are no longer needed is an important component of Governor Cuomo's plan to drive financial benefit for state taxpayers by creating jobs and putting property back on the tax rolls," Office of General Services Commissioner RoAnn Destito said. "Saratoga County is a burgeoning economic hub that attracts people for business and pleasure, making this RFP a unique opportunity for the right project."

The McGregor site presents a unique opportunity for redevelopment based on its location, size and history. The 325-acre parcel is situated at an elevation of 1,300 feet atop Mount McGregor with sweeping views of New York's Hudson Valley, Vermont's Green Mountains, and Massachusetts' Berkshires. It also features more than 100 structures totaling approximately 550,000 square feet and has been determined to be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The site is also surrounded by more than 700 undeveloped acres of woods, lakes and hiking trails, which will be transferred to Moreau State Park.

Rose Harvey, Commissioner of the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, said, "I'm grateful to OGS Commissioner RoAnn Destito and ESD President and CEO Howard Zemsky for helping making the transfer of these lands to Moreau Lake State Park a reality. I am confident the lands will be enjoyed by park visitors for generations to come."

Mount McGregor is located within Saratoga County, one of the fastest growing counties in New York State, which is experiencing tremendous economic growth spurred by the emergent semiconductor industry. The area is also known for its strengths in other industries including tourism, value added agricultural and food processing, transportation and logistics, as well green energy manufacturing. The site is located a few miles from Interstate 87 and has proximity to the cities of Saratoga Springs and Glens Falls, both which feature many tourism, cultural, and historical attractions, and several institutions of higher education.

In addition to the RFP, ESD has posted site photos, floor plans, a video and a reuse study on ESD's website at <http://esd.ny.gov/CorporateInformation/RFPs.html>. The materials provide a comprehensive analysis of the site, including descriptions and layouts of the site's structures and related infrastructure.

To support the communities affected by the closure of the facility, New York State has made funding available up to \$8 million through the Economic Transformation Program (ETP) for development in and around the site. Preference will be given to projects that create or retain jobs; prevent, reduce or eliminate unemployment or underemployment; or increase business activity. The site is also potentially eligible to qualify as a tax-free zone under the state's START-UP NY program, which would require partnership with a sponsoring academic institution.

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"These lands will be a wonderful addition to our State park system," said Senator Hugh T. Farley, "They will provide environmental, recreational and tourism-related benefits for the region. I applaud the efforts of the Governor and his state agencies in working with local officials and organizations to ensure the preservation and public use of these wild lands, while also taking steps to find productive uses for the facility campus which will benefit the local economy."

"The RFP is good news as it will enhance and expand the possibilities of redevelopment at the Mount McGregor site," said Senator Kathy Marchione. "I look forward to seeing the land used to its maximum potential, while preserving Grant's Cottage, a historic site and popular local attraction."

“The publication of this Request for Proposal is a key step to ensuring an expeditious transition from correctional facility to new development that will benefit the residents of Saratoga County and our neighboring regions,” said Assemblywoman Carrie Woerner. “I look forward to partnering with Empire State Development, as well as other state agencies, municipalities, and community stakeholders, to maximize the potential of the Mount McGregor site.”

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“We’re happy that an RFP may lead to something that will create jobs that pay a living wage and create a better economic picture for our community,” said Moreau Supervisor Preston Jenkins, Jr.

Empire State Development (ESD) is New York’s chief economic development agency (www.esd.ny.gov). The mission of ESD is to promote a vigorous and growing economy, encourage the creation of new job and economic opportunities, increase revenues to the State and its municipalities, and achieve stable and diversified local economies. Through the use of loans, grants, tax credits and other forms of financial assistance, ESD strives to enhance private business investment and growth to spur job creation and support prosperous communities across New York State. ESD is also the primary administrative agency overseeing Governor Cuomo’s Regional Economic Development Councils and the marketing of “I Love NY,” the State’s iconic tourism brand. For more information on Regional Councils and Empire State Development, visit www.regionalcouncils.ny.gov and www.esd.ny.gov.