

Possible sale of camp fires up a controversy

By Wayne Paul
Staff writer

For seven decades, Camp Wathana has been the kind of place where youngsters can come face-to-face with a deer, or explore a series of small, private lakes.

But now the wooded northwest Oakland County site is focus of a controversy that stands in sharp contrast to its tranquil setting.

The 380-acre camp is owned by Detroit Area Council of Camp Fire — the youth services agency known as the Camp Fire Girls before it began admitting boys several years ago.

Detroit Area Camp Fire trustees recently voted to sell the Rose Township site because of an estimated \$45,000 deficit — and estimated \$250,000 in camp losses over the past five years.

"Operating the camp has been a real drain on our finances," said Renee Ahee, council vice president of external affairs. "It's not an issue of selling the camp, it's an issue of keeping the council alive."

All told, she said, the camp would put the council in debt by some \$20,000 this year.

But the potential sale has divided trustees from group leaders, the foot soldiers of the Camp Fire organization. Several group leaders have banded together into a new group, Friends and Alumni of Camp Wathana, to block the sale.

"WE'RE UP IN arms," said Linda Zakoor, whose group includes youngsters from Garden City, Canton and Westland, among other communities. "Money will come and go but this camp is irreplaceable."

One of the friends, Sue McFarlin of Troy, said they are mounting a recall effort aimed at trustees who want to sell the camp. Specifically, the friends want to recall the seven trustees who recently defeated a motion to delay any decision on the camp for 18 months, the time McFarlin said is needed to explore alternatives.

"After looking at all the alternatives," McFarlin said, "we might agree the camp should be closed. But not until then."

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—Sue McFarlin
Troy mother
former camp counselor

McFarlin said she first attended Camp Wathana in the fourth grade and spent part of her summers there through high school. She was also a summer camp counselor.

"Right now, I have four daughters who go there," she said.

Beyond the group in-fighting, the issue also involves potential development of one of the remaining open parcels in a rapidly-growing region.

Camp Fire trustees are drawn from area business leaders, as well as group leaders.

Some members of the Friends and Alumni group accuse business-oriented trustees of being pro-development.

"IF YOU LOOK, it's the business people (on the board) who want to sell," said former group leader Pat Atkinson of Inkster.

Ahee, however, said no decision has been made on who the new owner would be.

"As far as selling it for camp use or development, I don't think anybody's made that decision," she said.

Camp Wathana (pronounced Wathana-a) has traditionally been booked for summer camps by local Camp Fire groups. There, campers make use of its three lodges, dining hall, and numerous cabins.

"The beauty is that we can use the camp when we want to," said Garden City group leader Joyce Hansen. "If we sold the camp, we'd have to use someone else's camp, but who knows if we'd even be able to schedule time."

Those who favor the sale, say a recent membership survey indicated interest in the camp was declining. The survey, however, was disputed by members of the Friends

and Alumni group, who said it included comments from long-inactive Camp Fire members.

Still, the North Oakland Camp Fire Council recently sold its own camp. Another Camp Fire campground remains in operation near Monroe.

"Camping isn't the only thing we do," Ahee said. Camp Fire operates programs for children who attend inner city schools and latch key children, as well as anti-substance abuse programs.

Maintaining the camp, Ahee said, would place those other programs in jeopardy.

Members of the Friends and Alumni group accuse Camp Fire directors of not doing enough to promote the camp.

"The camp is just not being used to its full potential," Zakoor said. "They should be doing more to make the camp available to other groups."

Friends and Alumni members also said trustees weren't doing enough fund-raising.

About \$5 in donations for each child who attended the camp last year would more than wipe out any deficit, they said.

Trustees, however, said they're trying their best in an increasingly competitive market.

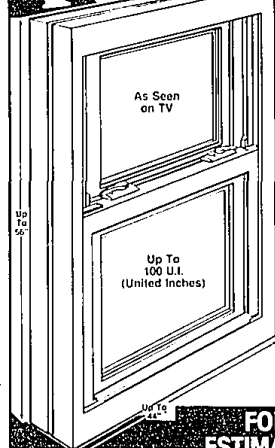
The issue is expected to come to a head during the annual board of directors election June 28. Those who favor saving the camp are expected to run a slate of candidates.

"Whether consciously or unconsciously, we've let the board direct us, rather than having us give direction to the board," Hansen said. "But how can you have Camp Fire without a camp?"

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