

Groups urge state to buy Whitney land in Adirondacks

36,000 acres have been on state open space priority list for decades

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A view of Forked Lake within the Whitney Park property. PHOTOGRAPHER: DAVID GIBSON/ADIRONDACK WILD

The 36,000-acre Whitney Park property in Long Lake is land the state and environmental conservation organizations have hoped to someday acquire for the public for several decades, and now it's coming onto the market.

Several conservation organizations have called for the state to acquire the property since John Hendrickson, the widower of the late Marylou Whitney, announced last week that the family property would be put on the market for \$180 million.

Whitney Park includes a historic Adirondack great camp with outbuildings, a commercial timber operation, and thousands of acres of forest and lakes.

“Even during the pandemic, this project ought to rise in levels of priority and urgency,” said David Gibson, managing partner in Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve. “The Department of Environmental Conservation and the land conservation community need to dust off prior studies and immediately resume efforts to work with the landowner and a variety of [Adirondack] Park stakeholders to conserve the tract.”

The land has been on the state’s priority open space protection list since 1992, he noted.

The land has been in the wealthy Whitney family since the 1890s. Hendrickson inherited it following Marylou Whitney’s death last year at age 93.

The land is some of the most remote in the Adirondacks, stretching through many miles west of where state Route 30 runs through Long Lake. The land borders the William C. Whitney Wilderness area and other state land, including the Pigeon Lake Wilderness and Sargent Pond Wild Forest.

The Whitney’s have a long history of supporting conservation efforts. In 1997, Whitney and Hendrickson sold 14,700 adjoining acres to New York state for \$17.1 million, and the state created the William C. Whitney Wilderness. William C. Whitney, who died in 1904, was a noted Adirondack conservationist during his lifetime.

“We are grateful to the Whitney family for their decades as committed stewards of their land,” said Rocci Aquirre, deputy director of the Adirondack Council. “Public ownership would ensure that these priceless lands are permanently protected and serve as a lasting legacy for the Whitney family. We look forward to working with colleagues in the land trust community and state officials to find ways to secure the possible future protection of these lands.”

“Whitney Park is a gem that defines description in many ways,” said Peter Bauer, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks. “It’s been at the top of every list for the most important tract of private land in the Adirondacks. The intact forests and beauty and sheer number of lakes and ponds set this

property apart from all others. The Whitney family were marvelous stewards of the property for more than 100 years.”

A state land purchase would likely require the involvement of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, who has worked for the state to acquire the Essex Chain Lakes and other significant properties since he became governor in 2011. His office referred a request to comment to DEC, which released the following statement:

"DEC is aware that the property is now officially listed for sale. DEC has not been contacted by the family regarding a future purchase of the Whitney lands. The property is listed on the state's Open Space Plan. The property is not covered by any kind of conservation easement. DEC will work with the family if they reach out with any interest in selling the land to the state."

A state purchase would also require input from the town of Long Lake. Long Lake Town Supervisor Clay Arsenault said he couldn't comment on any potential sale until he's had a chance to talk to the rest of the Town Board.

The Adirondack Park Agency Local Government Review Board is waiting to find out what the town of Long Lake and Hamilton County want to see happen with the property, but will support what local government wants, said spokesman Fred Monroe.

It is good, he said, that local officials are finding out that the land is for sale just as it goes on the market, rather than being informed late in a negotiation with a land trust organization, as he said happened with the Essex Chain Lakes land deal in 2007. The Nature Conservancy bought it from a paper and timber company, and sold it to the state in 2013.

"In this case, we may be able to get some concessions to help the towns if it does go to the state," Monroe said. "Absent some hard negotiations, I don't see the state paying the listing price or anywhere near it...I think the town will see it as an opportunity to have some good things happen here, but we want to support whatever the town and county want."

Various parties interviewed for this story agreed that it is possible that the developed camp and other areas to be subdivided from the vast forest and lake lands and the properties then sold or conserved separately. The lands could

also be sold privately, with the state taking a conservation easement that would prevent further development.

“Fortunately, a great deal of work has already been done to prepare for this moment,” said Gibson, of Adirondack Wild. “The Whitney landscape lying at the very heart of the Adirondack Park has been well studied in the past by conservation scientists and planners at the Adirondack Nature Conservancy, the Adirondack Park Agency, and by others.”