

# Debar Lodge proponents map out process for saving it

**By Gwendolyn Craig**  
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*Debar Lodge. Photo by Mike Lynch*

The divide between historic preservationists and environmentalists over the fate of a 1940s-era Adirondack camp appears to be narrowing, as a nonprofit pursues a possible constitutional solution.

The Debar Pond Institute, which formed in January, has proposed swapping about 400 acres adjacent to Debar Pond in exchange for ownership of about 6 acres including Debar Pond Lodge. The institute would own and manage the lodge and property north of Paul Smiths, and would provide public programming and educational opportunities there. The swap would require a constitutional amendment because Article 14 of the state constitution ensures that the Adirondack Forest Preserve, on which the lodge stands, is kept “forever wild” and prevents the state from leasing or selling the land and its timber.

Local legislators are mostly on board, and some advocacy organizations have suggested they may warm to the plan, depending on the details. But with several Adirondack-based constitutional amendments already contemplated, state draft plans for the property closed to public comment, and lingering public distaste for a 2013 land swap, there is some skepticism about when the deal could happen.

One of the Debar Pond Institute's board members, [Howard Kirschenbaum, is confident he and his colleagues can save the camp](#). The founder of Adirondack Architectural Heritage has been successful in passing constitutional amendments before, [including one in 1983 that saved Great Camp Sagamore](#), near Raquette Lake.

"We believe we have sufficient funds to purchase the land for the land exchange and do the bulk of what's needed to rehab the lodge," Kirschenbaum said.

## **Lodge history**

Adirondack architect William Distin designed Debar Pond Lodge in the 1940s for a Palm Beach, Florida, couple. Distin is a well-known figure in the region's architectural history, having designed places including the Whiteface Inn and the 1932 Olympic Arena in Lake Placid.

In 1979, the state acquired 1,200 acres to add to the forest preserve, including Debar Pond Lodge, which agency planning documents refer to as simply Debar Lodge. In that exchange, *Adirondack Life* magazine owner Barry Silverstein kept a 25-year lease on the buildings. In 2004, the lease expired, and the state took possession of the lodge. Without any state administrative purposes for the lodge and out-buildings, the structures have remained illegally for more than two decades.

"I've been trying to save it for over 20 years," said Ned LeMieux Sr., supervisor for the Town of Duane. The town, many surrounding municipalities and Franklin County have all endorsed saving the buildings.

Last year, the [Adirondack Park Agency and Department of Environmental Conservation proposed tearing down](#) the lodge as part of their review of management plans at the Debar Mountain Complex. The agencies proposed a Debar Lodge Day Use Area with pavilions, picnic tables and educational

signs. Most environmental advocates called for the buildings to be removed so the area could revert to wild forest. Historic preservationists [balked at both solutions and rallied to save the camp](#), which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Kirschenbaum said this is unfortunately how it goes in the field of historic preservation “when people can kick the can down the road.”

“When a building is actually threatened with destruction,” he said, “then proponents really mobilize.”

### **An amendment**

In a public document about the Debar Pond Institute and its plans, the institute provides some draft language for a constitutional amendment. It suggests that the institute will convey at least 300 acres of wild forest land within the Adirondack Park in exchange for Debar Lodge.

### **[Debar Land-Exchange document from the Debar Pond Institute](#)**

[Download](#)

State Assemblyman Billy Jones, D-Plattsburgh, said he and Assemblyman Steve Englebright, D-Setauket, are drafting the amendment, but he is not sure when it will be introduced to the Legislature.

Jones has also been trying to save the lodge for years, going back to his time as a county legislator.

“I’m not new to this game, but we are working on it,” Jones said. “Now we have a viable option with this group coming forward and putting up land to swap it out. That’s the key here.”

Kirschenbaum has been hesitant to share specifics on the acres the institute would swap for Debar. The institute has not purchased land yet. Jones said any legislation would need to be as specific as possible. State Sen. Dan Stec, R-Queensbury, said he, too, would support an amendment, but he also thinks it needs more details.

A constitutional amendment is a lengthy process that requires passage from two successive Legislatures, followed by a public referendum. Kirschenbaum hopes the amendment will pass this legislative session, allowing the group to work out more details about the land swap, and then have it pass again in 2023 before going to voters in November 2023. Stec and Jones hedged on the first passage timeline, again pointing to the specifics they think need to be included before their colleagues would vote.

Part of that caution, Stec said, comes from a 2013 constitutional amendment in the park that authorized a private mining company to conduct exploratory drilling for wollastonite on the forest preserve.

NYCO Minerals Inc. planned to swap 1,500 acres for 200 acres in the Jay Mountain Wilderness, a controversial proposal in part because it was the first amendment to benefit a private corporation. The company had pitched the amendment as necessary to save jobs, though it ended up [selling out to a France-based company, even after the amendment passed. Many residents lost their jobs, too.](#) Advocacy organizations, in particular Protect the Adirondacks, vehemently opposed the amendment and [castigated the DEC for its support and lobbying of the exchange.](#) The [state Legislature still has not finalized](#) the land swap.

David Gibson, managing partner of Adirondack Wild, Friends of the Forest Preserve, said the NYCO Minerals amendment was “deceptive.” He doesn’t believe the Assembly will support another land swap proposal until there are more details.

Stec said that while he hopes the Legislature can pass the Debar amendment in 2021, waiting to flesh out the details before first passage in 2022 wouldn’t actually delay the process. That’s because the next election isn’t until that fall, so passage by the next Legislature will have to wait for the 2023 session either way.

“That would all need to be spelled out,” Stec said, about the land the institute would swap. “There’s a lot of technical work that has to go into this. None of that will start unless people are on board with the conceptual idea.”

## **Possibilities**

Later, in an email, Kirschenbaum said the institute had identified 406 acres adjacent to Meacham Lake State Campground that is surrounded by the forest preserve.

“Normally an ‘inholding’ like this is considered very desirable as an acquisition to the Forest Preserve,” Kirschenbaum wrote. “However, Debar Pond Institute is not committed this particular parcel for the exchange.”

Before the institute purchases anything, Kirschenbaum said, it would need appraisals for the lands to be traded, and support from advocacy groups.

Gibson, for one, said Adirondack Wild hasn’t committed to supporting an amendment. He said it could have potential, however. The institute’s proposal suggests a number of public and community benefits, something that is particularly important to Adirondack Wild.

For example, Steven Englehart, executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, said the lodge would be a place for organizations like the Adirondack Diversity Initiative to host conferences and educational programs. Homeward Bound Adirondacks, a support organization for veterans and families based out of Saranac Lake, could use the space for its services. Kirschenbaum imagines school trips, workshops, tours and more.

## **Other factors**

Though that all sounds promising to Gibson, he wonders whether Debar’s proposed amendment could jump the line in a growing list of proposals pertaining to the Adirondacks. One in particular is on his mind: [Hamilton County’s proposal for an emergency communications tower on the top of Cathead Mountain](#). The county’s southern end is plagued by a dead zone where first responders are unable to get basic radio communication.

A solution could be building a tower on Cathead Mountain and a road across the forest preserve in order to maintain it, but so far the proposed amendment has stalled. Most of the environmental advocacy organizations in the Adirondacks support the amendment, but the Adirondack Council does not.

“Maybe this one jumps ahead of others,” Gibson said, “but I still think the Hamilton County issue is a serious one and only can be solved by an amendment.”

Bill Farber, chairman of Hamilton County’s Board of Supervisors, said it was disappointing that amendment didn’t get first passage last year.

“I would not have believed or expected that there wouldn’t be more empathy for emergency communications,” Farber said.

### **Change of plans**

Meanwhile, the DEC and APA’s plans for the Debar Mountain Complex and new day-use area are tangled into this new proposal.

Kirschenbaum said the institute’s amendment proposal would be a “big switch” from what APA and DEC were planning.

“They’re kind of shocked to find out the enormous amount of support for the lodge and the widespread opposition to the intensive use area,” Kirschenbaum said. The state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has also written in support of saving the lodge, so Kirschenbaum believes it will be difficult for APA to find tearing down the historic buildings will not have an “undue adverse impact on cultural resources.”

APA board members asked staff members during their monthly meeting in April what was happening with Debar Lodge and how that could factor into their approval process.

At the APA’s April meeting, Deputy Director Rick Weber said Debar is still “a very high priority.” He acknowledged the constitutional amendment proposal and said the staffers need to consider how it will affect their management plan review.

A DEC spokesperson told the *Adirondack Explorer* by emails that “DEC is reviewing public comments and all options remain under review at this time.”