As Mount McGregor nears closure, groups eye park expansion

By Maury Thompson, Post Star

January 3, 2014

MOREAU — Ulysses S. Grant Cottage would become the hub of a regional walking and mountain bike trail system under a proposal to expand Moreau Lake State Park to include portions of the land surrounding Mount McGregor Correctional Facility, which is scheduled to close July 26.

The trail system also would connect the cottage, a state historical site on the prison grounds, with Saratoga Spa State Park, providing a multi-dimensional cultural heritage opportunity that combines history with hiking or biking between the historic site and one state park or the other, stretching the typical hourlong historic site visit into a daylong excursion.

“The natural history, the cultural history and all of that — and beautiful views too from the Palmertown Range,” said Maria Trabka, executive director of Saratoga Preserving Land and Nature, a land trust that is one of the organizations working on the proposal.

The main prison complex would be offered for private development and not become part of the park.

The proposal brings hope for Grant Cottage, which had record visitors of more than 5,000 people last season but faces uncertainty because of the prison closure.

The prison provides the historic site — which includes the cottage and a visitors center — with electricity, water, septic, maintenance and security services.

“We met with the assistant commissioner of corrections back in the fall after we (the historic site) closed (for the season,)” said Tim Welch, president of Friends of Ulysses S. Grant, the volunteer organization that operates the state-owned historic site.

“And he wanted me to know, quite certainly, that at the end of July of 2014 the Department of Corrections intends to walk away from Mount McGregor without any expenses.”
Welch said the first step is for state officials to negotiate an agreement for the state Department of Corrections to transfer land around the prison to the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

“We’re hoping that after that is done, then Parks and Recreation can talk to us about how they can replace some of the costs that had been born by the Department of Corrections here before,” he said.

Welch said there was discussion of using chemical composting toilets at the historic site, or perhaps putting a solar voltaic array on the visitors center roof.

Another possibility is to reactivate a 19th-century well on the property.

“We happen to know, since we are historians, that there was a well that was used by the Balmoral Hotel up there before it burned down around 1900,” he said.

The hotel was near the cottage, which still stands, where Grant was staying when he died July 23, 1885, of throat cancer.

The friends group still has concerns about who will provide security at the historic site, once the prison closes, Welch said.

State parks officials also are concerned about the danger of leaving the historic site unattended during the offseason because of the unique artifacts in its collection, said state Sen. Elizabeth Little, R-Queensbury.

“It’s very close to how it was the day he (Grant) died there,” she said.

Welch said in some respects, the prison closing could help the historic site because having to pass through a guarded prison gate to get to the cottage discourages some people from visiting.

Tying Grant Cottage to the proposed trail system would be a new attraction, he said.

Trail planners were already speaking with Department of Corrections about cutting a trail across a northern corner of the prison property, said Trabka, of Saratoga PLAN.

The proposal to add some of the prison property to Moreau Lake State Park enables planners to expand proposed hiking and recreation opportunities envisioned for a trail system to be called the “Alternative Northway,” she said.
The trail system would go from Moreau to Saratoga Springs and on to Mechanicville, where it would connect with a trail system along the Champlain and Erie canals that goes all the way to Buffalo.

“The Northway connects the communities up the middle of our county. The Alternative Northway would do the same, but allow nonvehicular transportation,” she said.

Agreements for the Moreau Lake to Saratoga Springs trail, crossing public and private land, are in place with the exception of a small section in Greenfield Center, she said.

State Sen. Kathleen Marchione, R-Halfmoon, said she supports the proposal, so long as the main prison complex remains available for private development.

“If the Grant Cottage can be brought into some of the park land and if the folks that are in charge of that facility are in line with that and want that to go forward, then that is something I could support,” she said.

Wilton Supervisor Arthur Johnson and Moreau Supervisor Preston Jenkins said they support adding some of the prison property to Moreau Lake State Park.

The plan would complement his proposal to develop a resort casino at the main prison complex, Jenkins said.

“Certainly, we’d like to see a good portion of that land become part of Moreau Lake State Park,” he said.

Expanding public recreation activities in the Palmertown Range, between Grant Cottage and the park, has long been a priority of the state Department of Environmental Conservation Region 5 open space plan, said David Gibson, a member of the DEC open space advisory committee.

“It’s just an astounding experience to be up there and to realize that this is wild forest with a ton of wetlands and streams and beautiful, beautiful oak forests,” said Gibson, of the environmental group Adirondack Wild, Friends of the Forest Preserve.

Welch said Grant Cottage’s friends organization is moving forward with plans for the 2014 season, which runs from Memorial Day through Columbus Day, and is hoping for the best.

“We have a full season of events planned,” he said. “I’m a little nervous about the fact that more has not been done at this point. But I am quite
convinced that the Department of Parks and Recreation wants to preserve and continue the operation of our Grant Cottage on top of Mount McGregor, and that they are working as quickly as they can to complete the legal work.”