

Sale of Adirondack prison hits snag: It's in the Forest Preserve

Adirondack Preserve laws block building on site, activists argue

By Rick Karlin
Times Union

Wednesday, June 3, 2015



Two of the older dormitories of the former Camp Gabriels during an open house Thursday, Oct. 28, 2010, in Gabriels, NY. (John Carl D'Annibale / Times Union archive)

State officials pointed to the sale of the shuttered Camp Gabriels a year and a half ago as a success in the effort to re-purpose such facilities in an era of prison downsizing.

But the sale has hit a snag from New York's own laws regarding the Adirondack Forest Preserve, where the former minimum-security prison is located.

The transaction has never been completed. The buyers, who want to build an Orthodox Jewish summer camp, say they have encountered difficulty getting title insurance, with environmental groups contending a constitutional amendment could be required to redevelop the camp.

Gabriels, near Saranac Lake, is in the preserve, where the sale and development of forestland usually requires such approval by lawmakers and then a vote by the public. That is a lengthy process, requiring approval from

two separate legislatures and a public referendum.

While Camp Gabriels was a prison for years and previously served as a tuberculosis sanitarium, several groups pointed out that ownership of the property would put public land into private hands.

The camp drew seven bids in a 2013 auction.

[Mohammad Ibrahim](#) of Elmont offered the winning bid of \$210,777 but he withdrew, leaving the second-highest bidder, [Adam Fine](#) of Rockland County, with the 92-acre property for \$166,000. Fine couldn't be reached on Wednesday.

The state [Office of General Services](#), which ran the auction, maintains that the property can be sold and re-purposed.

"Portions of the land have been developed for more than 100 years, operating for numerous purposes including a treatment center for tuberculosis, part of [Paul Smith's College](#) and as a state prison," OGS spokeswoman [Heather Groll](#) said.

Additionally, the [Adirondack Park Agency](#), which regulates land use in the park, reclassified the site from "State Administrative" to "Moderate Intensity," which would allow some development, contingent on its sale. But others disagree.

"It was all state (Forest Preserve) land and it should never have been auctioned off in the first place," said [David Gibson](#), a partner in Adirondack Wild, an environmental organization.

"We raised issues back in 2011," [Peter Bauer](#) of Protect the Adirondacks, said in an email.

Article XIV of the state Constitution says that state Forest Preserve land shall remain public and undeveloped, often referred to as "Forever Wild" land.

Gibson, in a 2011 letter to the [Cuomo Administration](#), contended that the land should have become protected in the 1980s when the state purchased it from nearby Paul Smiths, after which it was turned into a prison.

"State-owned land in Adirondack Forest Preserve counties ... cannot be treated like surplus State-owned land," he said.

According to earlier reports, Fine and Rockland-based Rabbi [Eli Hersh](#) are looking to turn the site, which has dormitories, a gym, chapel and kitchen, into an Orthodox Jewish summer camp for boys.

During an earlier presentation to officials in the Gabriels area, Hersh said he envisions the camp as running during the summer. Campers would study in the morning with sports and outdoor activities in the afternoon.