

Canton's new hope

Camp Hope to get a makeover

By Kyle Perrotti | Nov 30, 2016

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CANTON — After years of litigation and strife, one of Canton's greatest assets finally has a new hope.

On Tuesday, Dec. 6, the town of Canton, along with a group of Clemson University students and faculty, is hosting a forum to present their recommendations for improvements to Camp Hope. The forum will feature two presentations, each put together by completely separate groups of students.

Each group's presentation will highlight what Camp Hope volunteer Pam Kearsse sees as the camp's unlimited potential. As long-time neighbors to the Cruso facility just off the Blue Ridge Parkway, Camp Hope has long been a vital part of Kearsse and her family's life.

In fact, her youngest daughter was recently wed there. She said she is excited to see what ideas the students will bring up to improve what she calls her back yard.

"This place is really a diamond in the rough," she said. "There is just so much that can be done with this place and so much potential to host a variety of events."

Champion International gifted the 110-acre property, complete with cabins, a giant pavilion, a dining hall and outdoor recreation opportunities galore, to the YMCA in Canton with the provision it would revert to the town in the event the organization folded.


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Canton eventually gained possession of the facility, but found maintenance costly. Camp Hope was eventually leased to another organization, something John and Deborah Prelaz, who had purchased a neighboring tract, contended violated the terms of the deed. They argued they were entitled to the property under a so-called reverter clause.


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After a four-year legal battle, the town gained sole possession of the facility, but not before paying the Prelaz' \$175,000 and spending \$253,000 in legal bills. The facility is valued at an estimated \$1.5 million.

The future

The collaboration with the South Carolina university was set into motion in the fall of 2015 after the town's extended legal battle to gain ownership of the property. Following the approval of the town's fiscal year 2016 budget, Town Manager Seth Hendler-Voss contacted the architecture program at Clemson and proposed a

joint effort between the school and the town of Canton to put some much needed work into Camp Hope.

With Clemson on board, Hendler-Voss went before Canton's board of aldermen to pitch the project. Once everyone agreed to the joint effort, students traveled to Canton to give an initial presentation to the Camp Hope Commission (now part of the town's Culture and Recreation Advisory Commission).

Students, with the input received by the commission, have made several trips to Camp Hope and Canton to get a handle on what makes the area unique. Additionally, Hendler-Voss and members of the commission took a trip down to the university to tour its facilities, something Hendler-Voss — who has a degree in landscape architecture — said brought on some nostalgia.

"It's been really fun to see the next generation of designers," he said. "I'm impressed with how far technology has come in the field."

Following Tuesday's forum, the two groups will take public feedback into consideration and complete a master plan that will be submitted to Canton. From there, it is up to town officials to decide which phases of the plan they would like to execute.

Professors Paul Russell and Dustin Albright are advising the students through a class called "Studio Appalachia," which is voluntarily taken by a combination of undergraduate and graduate students studying either architecture or landscape architecture. Russell and Albright presented their students with two project options, an equine facility on campus, and Camp Hope.

"The overwhelming majority of students selected Camp Hope as their first choice," Russell said.

Russell and Albright are no strangers to Haywood County. Both have worked on multiple projects in the area. The men's preexisting love for the area and its rich history stoked their desire to take Hendler-Voss up on his proposal.

"We could have turned Seth down," Russell said. "But that's an area where we find a ton of appeal, historically and otherwise."

Russell, Albright and their students have gone above and beyond, making trips on their own to conduct research. Albright said he is thrilled to have the opportunity to work on such a unique, yet challenging project with so much potential.

"It's a place that's been well-lived in and there was quite a bit of underutilized land and deferred maintenance," he said. "But it's a beautiful setting, and it's a really remarkable place."

Because of Kears's intimate familiarity with the camp, she has had a major role in shaping the Clemson delegation's idea of what Camp Hope means to Canton. She said her main priority is to preserve the camp's rustic charm while still upgrading the facilities.

The chief focus of the project is making sure the camp complies with the regulations under the Americans With Disabilities Act, which dictate that bathrooms must be available and accessible. The best way to ensure compliance is to put men's and women's restrooms in the main lodge. As is, anyone needing to use the bathroom must leave the building, which means occasionally braving the elements.

In addition to adding bathrooms to the lodge, Kears, Hendler-Voss and the Clemson students agree that the building, which serves as the camp's centerpiece, needs some other upgrades, including a heating system that would make it available for year-round use.

"There's a tremendous amount of history in that lodge," Russell said. "It just needs some updates to make it more functional."

Family-centric

Another top priority is to transform some of the existing group cabins into family cabins, with the intent of drawing in families who don't want to sleep in a tent. As is, the only way someone can rent a cabin is if they book the whole camp.

Both of the plans to be brought up Tuesday recommend developing the currently underutilized back meadow by installing a boardwalk, which would allow the area to remain undisturbed, thus increasing the camp's biodiversity.

Additionally, where the river pools up at the fishing/swimming hole, both plans will recommend installing small structure to improve accessibility while also preventing hazardous river bank erosion.

Along with figuring out how to improve the camp, the students will present marketing ideas, from potential logos to ideas on how to bolster mid-week rentals, something Kears said the camp has struggled with in recent years.

The one thing that still has many people guessing is the cost of executing some of the students' ideas.

“The amount of work that needs to be done out there will probably be costly,” Hendler-Voss said. “But we don’t know what those costs are yet.”

Russell said that the university's sole job is to provide ideas. Which ones are selected and how to execute them is up to Canton, making public input valuable. Tuesday’s forum will give residents a chance to consider what the price for some of these projects could be.

Due to financial limitations, Hendler-Voss said that residents can be certain that not all projects will be undertaken right away. He wants people to know that some projects will be completed in the short-term, while others will have a decade-long timeline.

Although those in the loop said that the two master plan proposals have similarities, they hope for a huge public turnout, because residents will be able to provide recommendations that no one has thought of yet.

“We’d hope to see a great turnout from the community to see what these students have done so they can provide their feedback,” Russell said.

The forum will begin at 6:30 p.m. at the town municipal building.

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