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Efforts continue toward preservation of Camp Ojiketa

BY DENISE MARTIN

A whole host of players are inching ever so slightly forward to preservation of Camp Ojiketa as public open space. In the last few days there have been gains at many levels, but the work is not done yet.

Ojiketa is an 80-acre Camp Fire camp on the southeast end of Big Green Lake. It contains acres of woods, trails, 2,300 linear feet of unspoiled shoreline and bogs, habitat and wildlife. The Camp Fire Council of Minnesota announced in mid-2006 the camp had to be sold to support other Camp Fire efforts.

The Trust for Public Land has acquired an option to purchase Ojiketa. The agreement came at the end of last month and gives entities involved until the end of this calendar year to close on the purchase.

In St. Paul-- state legislators are giving at least preliminary support to a bill; carried by Rep. Jeremy Kalin, DFL-Lindstrom, seeking state assistance for Chisago City in acquiring Ojiketa from the Trust for Public Land (TPL).

Rep. Kalin said this week the chair of the House capital investment committee allowed a bonding measure for acquiring Ojiketa to remain in the bill under consideration. Bonding of \$1.4 million for Ojiketa made it out of the Environmental & Natural Resources Finance Division. But, the action still has a long ways to go, Kalin cautioned. The environmental capital bonding requests still go through another level of House committee review (it was scheduled to be taken up by the capital investment finance division committee late Monday or Tuesday. Bonding then needs to be passed on a floor vote.

Kalin, though, is optimistic that Ojiketa, which is gradually being accepted by legislators as an important regional park, will get some level of state aid.

The bill currently matches \$2 of non-state aid for every \$3 in state monies.

Chisago City Administrator John Pechman mentioned that he also "gives a lot of credit" to the Ojiketa camper alumni organization that coalesced when Camp Fire announced intentions to sell Ojiketa.

For the approximately one year the site was tied up in negotiations between a high end developer and Camp Fire, many continued to be involved behind-the-scenes. The development proposal fell through.

Pechman said the Ojiketa Preservation Society, (see ojiketa.com) refused to throw in the towel, and continued talking to preservation groups like the TPL, raised funds and toiled behind the scenes to save this very special site.

It was this connection that the site had with a large group of people that "resonated" with the Trust For Public Land officials, said TPL spokesperson Bob McGillivray. He explained that the non-profit land conservation group looks to support preservation of open spaces and parks that people will use. TPL is all about enabling people to connect to the land, he added.

The role of TPL will be to help steer the Ojiketa acquisition through the next 10 months to a successful closing and re-sale to Chisago City. The TPL works with foundations and others to put together funding (\$3.8 million estimated) to buy the site. TPL's sale price to Chisago City depends on the structure of the financing, McGillivray explained.

Supporters of keeping Ojiketa as open space for public use can donate to either: the Trust For Public Land or to the Ojiketa Preservation Society or to Chisago City. "...whatever makes them (donors) most comfortable," McGillivray added.

For 35 years the TPL has worked with non-profits and government units to conserve real estate. The TPL works in urban city areas and in wilderness acquisitions. Approximately 80,000 acres in Minnesota have been saved with TPL involvement.

The Ojiketa parcel is beautiful habitat and lakeshore in the "developing fringe" of the metro region, McGillivray said, which made it an especially attractive effort.

Chisago City Council holds a public hearing Tuesday, March 11 which is a required step for the city to apply for a Department of Natural Resources grant that might assist in buying Ojiketa. The "Remediation Grant" hearing is a required step before the city can apply. Chisago City is investigating all possible environmental-based funding sources.

Administrator Pechman also said TPL has been "sinking a lot of time, effort and money" into the effort to save Camp Ojiketa and he is thrilled and honored the national organization is involved.

Ojiketa got its start when Camp Fire bought 22 acres on Green Lake in 1926. The site has expanded over the years; Zonta Club of St. Paul built Zonta Lodge in 1955. There was a 32-acre horse riding area purchased in 1967 that was subdivided and lots sold in 1987. Horse riding was discontinued.

The adjacent sister-camp "Cheewin" was sold to builders and the Ridge Pointe townhome development was constructed.

According to the Camp Fire Council's 2006 sale offering memorandum, there's 2,300 feet of shoreline, a swimming beach and acres of trails used by campers. There are a couple of lodge style buildings and small cabins, and a director's home and chapel.