

Chisago City, nonprofit and former campers unite to save Camp Ojiketa land for park

\$3.8M needed to buy property for park

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Almost two years have passed since Camp Ojiketa in Chisago City closed. But the 71-acre parcel along Green Lake has not yet sold — and that makes conservationists and camp alumni hopeful they can save it from development.

The nonprofit Trust for Public Land, city leaders and a group of former campers are trying to raise \$3.8 million to turn Camp Ojiketa into a park.

The land is owned by the Minnesota Council of Camp Fire USA. Camp Ojiketa was founded in 1926 as a summer camp for girls and eventually served boys, too. It closed in 2006.

Camp Fire USA put the property up for sale in 2006 for \$5 million, and a couple of buyers came forward but then backed off.

Judy Montgomery, a former camper and founding member of the Ojiketa Preservation Society, understands the camp's draw. The 61-year-old Gordon, Wis., resident started going there in second grade and kept going into her teens as a counselor. Montgomery has attended reunions and been in touch with alumni ever since.

That bond made it easy to get people to rally around the project, she said.

"This is a camp that was so near and dear to many of us. We just had a really hard time thinking it would be turned into condos," Montgomery said. "There's so little green space ... why not try to save this 70 acres for future generations?"

Of the three groups, the Ojiketa Preservation Society wants to raise \$100,000; Chisago City has pledged up to \$1.5 million; and the Trust for Public Land, a nonprofit conservation group, is looking for grants.

They have an option to purchase the land through Dec. 31.

Bob McGillivray, senior project manager at the Trust for Public Land, said the Camp Ojiketa property is valuable ecologically and biologically — the 71-acre camp includes wetlands, forest and 3,100 feet of lakeshore that supports a variety of wildlife. Plus, he said, Chisago County is growing, and a new park would be attractive to residents and give kids a place to learn about nature.

The former campers' commitment to preserving the property was the clincher, McGillivray said.

"This is where they learned to be good stewards of the land. This is where they learned about nature," he said. "When we saw the passion these people have, we had to get involved."

City Administrator John Pechman said the county still has a lot of open space, but most of it is agricultural. There isn't much wooded lakeshore property up for grabs.

"It brings together all the things people in this area value and enjoy," Pechman said. "It would be such an asset for the community."

The Ojiketa Fund

Donations can be sent to:

Chisago City Ojiketa Fund, 10625 Railroad Ave., P.O. Box L, Chisago City, MN 55013-9400

For more information, go to ojiketa.com

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