

THE DEBAR LODGE LAND EXCHANGE AMENDMENT

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS



WHAT AND WHERE IS DEBAR LODGE?

Debar Pond Lodge is a grand Adirondack lodge in the rustic tradition situated on the shore of Debar Pond in the Town of Duane, Franklin County, in the Debar Mountain Wild Forest unit of the State Forest Preserve. It is located about 20 minutes north of Paul Smiths and 20 miles south of Malone in the northern portion of the Adirondack Park.

Debar Lodge was built around 1940 for Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Wheeler of Palm Beach, Florida for their family's use. The two-story lodge is of log construction, one of the largest full-log buildings in the Adirondacks. It was designed by William Distin, one of the two or three most important architects in Adirondack history. With offices in Saranac Lake, Distin had a 60-year career designing some of the region's most outstanding rustic camps,, including Wonundra ("The Point"), Eagle Nest, Last Chance Ranch and Minnowbrook, and public buildings including Northwoods School, St. Johns in the Wilderness Episcopal Church, Whiteface Inn and the 1932 Olympic Arena.

Surrounded by expansive lawns and enormous white pine trees, Debar Lodge sits dramatically back from the shore of Debar Pond, which is flanked by Debar Mountain and adjoining peaks. This grand lodge set in a magnificent scene is reminiscent of the great lodges of the National

Parks of the American West and is a superb example of architecture and nature beautifully combined to create a stunning visual experience,

The 10-bedroom lodge contains a large, two-story great room with dramatic granite fireplace, a lounge and a dining room with impressive barnboard and other wood finish details. A kitchen wing provides ample spaces for work, storage and one or two staff bedrooms. A compatible, brainstorm-sided caretaking building near the lodge provides additional bedroom and work areas. Several sheds and outbuildings provide functional spaces for workshop, storage, gardening, or meeting space.

In 2014, in recognition of its outstanding architectural character which “embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period [and] method of construction”, “represents the work of a master”, and “possesses high artistic values”, the Debar Pond Lodge complex was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

WHY DOES DEBAR LODGE NEED SAVING?

In 1979, New York State acquired the buildings at Debar and their surrounding 1,200 acres, including the pond, for the State Forest Preserve. The conveyance was subject to a 25-year lease of the buildings and 25 acres by its then occupant, Barry Silverstein, owner of *Adirondack Life* magazine. In 2004 when the lease expired, the state took possession of the lodge and adjoining buildings.

Typically when the State of New York purchases property within the Adirondack and Catskills Parks, the buildings are torn down or allowed to return to nature. That is because Article XIV of the New York State Constitution stipulates that, “The lands of the state, now owned or hereafter acquired, constituting the forest preserve as now fixed by law, shall forever be kept as wild forest lands. They shall not be sold, leased or exchanged, or be taken by any corporation public or private, nor shall the timber thereon be sold, removed or destroyed.” Therefore, unless the Department of Environmental Conservation or other state agency could find a use for Debar Lodge compatible with the purposes of the Forest Preserve, Debar would have to be torn down. Since 2004, the state has not found a compatible use, or even when potentially permissible uses have been proposed, it has been unable to find the resources to refurbish and operate the lodge. This is reflected in the Department’s recent draft plan to demolish the lodge and its outbuildings and to create a Day Use area on the site. Therefore, unless an alternative solution is found, Debar Lodge will be destroyed.

WHAT SPECIFICALLY IS BEING PROPOSED? WHAT DOES THE DEBAR LODGE LAND EXCHANGE AMENDMENT DO?

The solution is for the state legislature to pass and the voters of New York State to approve an amendment to the state constitution that allows an exception to Article 14 specifically to preserve Debar. The draft of the proposed legislation reads as follows:

“Notwithstanding the foregoing provisions, and subject to legislative approval of the tracts to be exchanged prior to the actual transfer of title and the conditions herein set forth, the state in order to facilitate the preservation of historic buildings listed on the national register of historic places and make said buildings available for public education and recreation, may convey to Debar Pond Institute, a New York not-for-profit educational organization six acres of land and buildings thereon located at Debar Pond, Town of Duane, County of Franklin, and in exchange therefore, the said Debar Pond Institute shall convey to the state for incorporation into the Forest Preserve at least 300 acres of wild forest land located within the Adirondack Park on condition that the legislature shall determine that the lands received by the state are at least equal in value to the lands and buildings to be conveyed by the state and that the natural and historic character of the lands and buildings conveyed by the state will be secured by appropriate covenants and restrictions and that the lands and buildings conveyed by the state will reasonably be available for public visits or use according to agreement between Debar Pond Institute and the state.”

Put more simply, the non-profit organization will give the state at least 300 acres for the Forest Preserve, and the state will give the non-profit organization six acres including Debar Lodge. The acreage the state receives must be at least as valuable as the six acres and buildings it will be giving up. And there will be specific conditions associated with the exchange that will insure that the buildings and land conveyed will be well preserved, used in the public interest, and available for public access.



HAVE THERE EVER BEEN PREVIOUS LAND EXCHANGE AMENDMENTS LIKE THIS?

Since its inception in 1895, the state legislature and New York voters have approved over 20 amendments to Article 14, the “forever wild” provision of the state constitution. Each amendment allowed a very specific exception to Article 14 for a specific public purpose. In recent decades, the form of amendment that has been most successful has been a “land exchange” amendment, in which the state gives up a small number of acres of Forest Preserve for some clear public purpose and receives in return a considerably larger number of acres of equal or greater value to be added to the Forest Preserve.

For example, in 1983, 62% of the voters approved an exchange in which “to facilitate the preservation of historic buildings” the state transferred to the non-profit Sagamore Institute 10 acres and caretaking buildings adjoining Sagamore’s own property in return for Sagamore’s transferring to the state over 200 acres that adjoined state land elsewhere in the county. Since then the voters approved a 12-acre for 144-acre exchange with the town of Keene for cemetery purposes; a 1-acre for 12-acre exchange with the Town of Long Lake to drill a well for town drinking water; a 6-acre for 10-acre exchange with National Grid to improve and re-locate power lines, and three other fairly complicated land exchanges.

WHAT IS DEBAR POND INSTITUTE AND HOW WILL THEY USE THE PROPERTY?

Debar Pond Institute was recently formed as a New York State non-for-profit organization with the following purposes: (1) To preserve Debar Pond Lodge for the education, enjoyment and inspiration of present and future generations, (2) To operate a diverse program open to the public, including: (a) educational programs, including environmental and outdoor education, Adirondack history and historic preservation, veterans support, enhancing diversity in the Adirondacks, and/or personal growth and development, (b) public lodging and recreation, and (c) public tours.

The Institute’s initial board of directors, which will be added to over time, is a group of respected individuals who have an established record, in some cases a lifetime’s work, in the Adirondack Park in the fields of historic preservation, education, hospitality, and business. They already have commitments for funding sufficient to purchase the land for the land exchange and accomplish a major portion of the rehabilitation required to make Debar Lodge operable. They are (with some information for identification purposes only):

Sarah R. Bogdanovitch (Paul Smiths). Professional forester; professor, Paul Smith’s College; board member, Adirondack conservation and education organizations

Pat Benton (Long Lake). Former owner of historic Hedges Resort on Blue Mountain Lake; board member, Sagamore Institute of the Adirondacks

David Hislop (Essex). Director, Essex Community Heritage Organization; former president, Adirondack Architectural Heritage

Mary Hotaling (Saranac Lake). Founder and former Executive Director, Historic Saranac Lake

Howard Kirschenbaum (Tupper Lake). Founder, first president, Adirondack Architectural Heritage; former owner or director of Great Camps Uncas, Sagamore and White Pine

Edward “Ned” Lemieux (Duane). Supervisor , Town of Duane

Richard Longstreth (Keene Valley). Professor of American Studies, George Washington University; author, *A Guide to Architecture in the Adirondacks*

Jake Silverstein (Wilmington). Chairman, *Adirondack Life* Magazine

WILL THIS BE ONE MORE IN AN ENDLESS STREAM OF ADIRONDACK LAND EXCHANGE AMENDMENTS TO SAVE HISTORIC BUILDINGS?

No. There are no other known historic buildings currently within the State Forest Preserve in the Adirondacks which don’t have an established, legal use or which, if they did become endangered, would rise to the level of importance to justify a land exchange.

Meanwhile, New York Environmental Law, Section 9-0109, enacted in 1982, mandates a process that minimizes the chance of the state acquiring important cultural resources in the future. The law specifies that *before* the state acquires property in the Adirondack and Catskill Parks for the Forest Preserve, it must evaluate the historical and architectural resources thereon and, if such resources are identified, the state must go through a process of identifying alternative solutions for preserving those resources. While the law doesn’t completely preclude the possibility of the state’s acquiring historic properties in the future, it makes it much less likely.

WHAT ASSURANCES WILL THERE BE THAT DEBAR POND WILL STILL BE AVAILABLE TO THE PUBLIC AND THAT DEBAR POND LODGE WILL ALWAYS BE AVAILABLE FOR PUBLICLY ACCESSIBLE ACTIVITIES AND VIEWING?

The language of the constitutional amendment itself stipulates that the land exchange cannot take place unless the natural and historical character of the lands and buildings being conveyed by the state are protected by appropriate covenants and restrictions. Based on prior amendments, such as the 1983 Sagamore land exchange, such restrictions and covenants will likely include provisions such as the following:

Any changes to exteriors of Debar Lodge and adjacent caretaker’s building must be carried out in conformance with the Secretary of the Interior’s *Standards for the Rehabilitation of Historic Buildings*.

The property must be used for public educational and recreational purposes, including but not limited to educational programs, workshops and events; meetings and events of local and regional organizations; public lodging, and public tours.

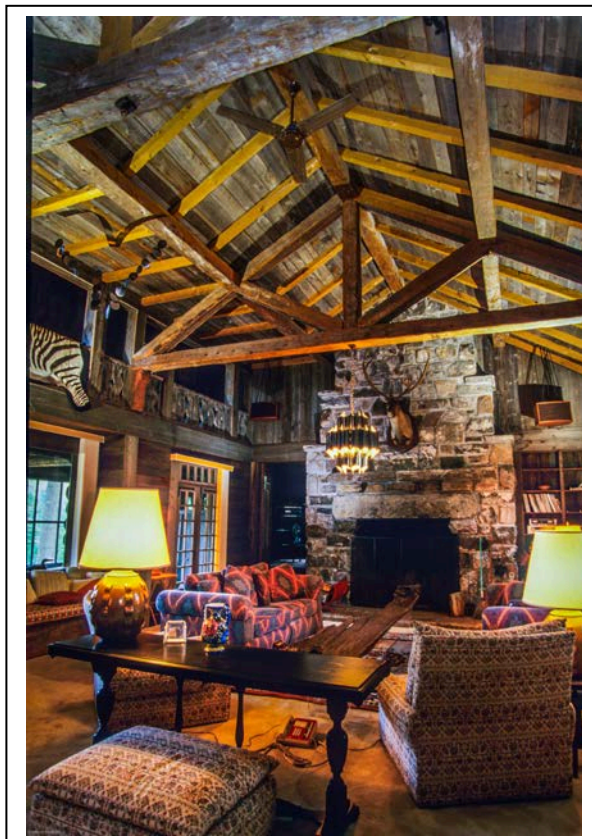
If the property is ever sold, it must be sold to another non-for-profit organization.

In addition, the boundaries of the six acre parcel around Debar Lodge to be conveyed by the state will be drawn so as to insure that the public will continue to have access to the northeastern corner of shoreline of Debar Pond. From the current public trailhead parking area, this would provide a short walk or carry to the shoreline of Debar Pond for scenic viewing, picnicking, swimming, boating, or cross-country skiing.

IS DEBAR LODGE REALLY WORTH THE TROUBLE OF A CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT?

Yes. This particular land exchange amendment is a win-win solution on many fronts—cultural, environmental, educational and recreational. Specifically the land exchange:

- saves a magnificent work of architecture from destruction
- uses the historic property for many forms of public education and recreation
- enhances the Forest Preserve by approximately 300 or more acres
- maintains public access to Debar Pond and adjacent hiking trails
- helps disburse usage of the Forest Preserve away from the overused High Peaks region
- provides jobs and economic benefits to the local community
- costs the state nothing; in fact it saves the state hundreds of thousands of dollars in demolition costs and the additional costs of creating alternative uses on that site



Photographs courtesy of Nancie Battaglia.

For further information and photographs on Debar's history and current situation, see AARCH's 9-minute video on http://youtu.be/IGdBdCvmg_c