

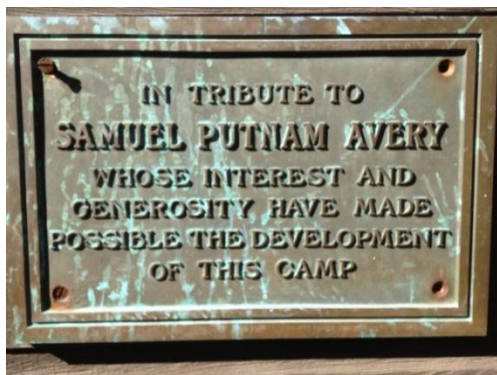
Camp Aya-Po

Ad Hoc Committee Report



Submitted (Draft)





Board of Selectman Charge/Discussion

On January 16, 2014, the Ad Hoc AYA-PO Committee met for the first time and formally received its charge from the Board of Selectmen which is:

1. Primary Focus - A plan of strategic goals and objectives for the recreational use of the property.
2. Secondary Focus -Plans for security and the reduction of vandalism.
3. Tertiary Focus -A plan for maintenance and upkeep of the property.

At that meeting the committee discussed some initial ideas for the safety, security and potential for ongoing use. Members of the Committee came with diverse views as to what constitutes the best use of the property, ranging from the removal of all structures preserving the land as pure open space, to preserving the camp structures as near as possible to when the camp was fully operational. The Committee agreed to gather input from the public and knowledgeable professionals in safety, security and operating similar properties in a effort to build consensus.

The mission of the committee was complicated by some confusion concerning the area in which the town could maintain

buildings and comply with the terms of the Open Space Grant. The Committee received comments and documentation from the town engineer and held a joint meeting with the Planning Commission and worked with the Board of Selectmen to insure that ample space existed around the major structures to provide options for the future use of the space to the best advantage of the community.

To develop a comprehensive understanding of the issues involved in answering the charge and the practicality of preserving any structures, the Committee walked the area containing the buildings being considered for preservation, as well as the buildings slated for removal. The condition of the buildings raised concerns for a number of Committee members. Vandalism and exposure to the elements have put all of the structures in need of significant repair, and the Board of Selectmen made it clear that there are not any town funds available for the restoration of the camp buildings or ongoing maintenance of the property. Steve Squillace, Vice Chair of the Committee, assured the Committee that he has been in contact with most, if not all, of the civic organizations in Somers and while no one has made any financial commitments at this point, the majority has expressed significant interest in assisting in making the restoration a success.

The Committee requested and received comments and recommendations from the Somers Volunteer Fire Department and the Resident State Trooper concerning safety and security issues, as well as suggestions to maintain the safety and security of the property, and limit any negative impact the change from private to public land has on the neighborhood. The Fire Department stressed the importance of access to the hydrant at Hi Pease Pond as it is the sole water supply for fire control in that part of

Somers. The Fire Department suggested the addition of a second dry hydrant on the camp side of the pond. Unfettered access to the boat launch is also a concern of the Department as it is essential if they need to launch their boat for a water rescue. The Department also uses the beach area for water rescue training and wishes to preserve that access. The Department indicated that they have experience with rescuing hikers in the State Forest, but noted that the Department lacks an off road vehicle to transport injured hikers so they have to be carried out.

Comments by the Resident Trooper focused upon issues of vandalism which has been a constant issue at the Camp due to its remote location. The police will respond to calls for service, but current resources will not permit increased patrols of the property. When asked about a central station alarm or installing cameras, the trooper responded that it would be difficult to alarm the whole Camp. The Soapstone Mountain antenna array is alarmed and gated and that works, but it's a much smaller area. Also, the police do not directly monitor alarms. Alarm monitoring is usually accomplished through a third party contractor. The Trooper expressed concern about protecting anything of value that was erected on the site without significant security measures. The Trooper recommended locating a caretaker on the property as the Camp had done years before, noting that this would serve as a significant deterrent. The Trooper was asked whether the police might like to use the Camp for training of police dogs to create a law enforcement presence. The Committee noted that signs could be posted, police cars would be there more

often and visible, and maybe knowing the police used the facility might be a deterrent.

The Trooper agreed, stating there were a lot of canine officers in Somers and surrounding towns that might use such a place to run their dogs.

The Committee also contacted other communities currently operating similar properties to discover what issues they faced and solutions they have discovered, as well as the economic viability of such operations. Specifically, the Committee contacted the Directors of: Camp Nahaco in Woodstock, Northwest Park in Windsor, Creasor Park in Coventry and Countryside Park in Avon, as well as Pine Knoll Recreation Area in East Longmeadow, MA. The Committee looked at any costs associated with the buildings (not surrounding property) which were passed onto the community and the use of an after-hours onsite human presence.

Mr. Colin Drury, East Longmeadow Parks and Recreation Director, met personally with the Committee, and shared his experience and insights into restoring and

operating a camp. His experience in East Longmeadow was that once the first building was certified as useable, the operation became self-supporting. The Committee recognizes that

Somers has an existing summer camp program, but believes that access to shade and an indoor area for activities in foul weather make the program more marketable.



Park	Self-Sustaining	Caretaker
Camp Nahaco	Yes	Yes
Northwest Park	Yes	Yes
Creasor Park	Yes	No
Countryside Park	Yes	No
Pine Knoll Recreation Area	Yes	No

In addition to gathering information from professionals, the Committee has received ongoing community input concerning the camp, and held formal public comment sessions. These sessions were well attended by residents living near the camp, by people from other parts of our community and by those who have a personal connection to the camp. This part of the process served as a critical component in assuring that the plans of the Committee best reflect the unique desires and concerns of Somers residents.



removal under terms of the grant, as well as hazards brought about by the current condition of the buildings under consideration for preservation. Additionally, depending on removal costs, subsurface debris in Hi Pease Pond will delay or prohibit some otherwise permitted activities such as swimming.

Committee's Safety Recommendations:

Safety Issues:

Early in the discussion it became apparent that the safety issues involved in this project are broader in scope than just safety of the camp proper. The Fire Department maintains a dry hydrant on Hi Pease Pond which is the principle water supply for fighting fires for the majority of homes on the mountain. Furthermore, there is a boat launch installed for use by the Fire Department to launch rescue craft should the need arise. Unfettered access is critical to the safety of the users of this large aquatic area.

Initial safety concerns for the property include the dilapidated structures slated for

With hiking trails, water access, and potential community activities at the camp buildings, it is easy to foresee Camp Aya-Po as a popular community destination which will require management of vehicular and pedestrian traffic. Reconnecting the Blue Trail to its historical route will involve crossing Camp Road which is narrow and unimproved with little to no usable shoulder for parking. To insure the necessary access of emergency vehicle and the safety of persons accessing the property, we recommend that Camp Road be posted for its entire length as "No Parking, Tow Zone." This will insure unhindered access by the Fire Department and other first responders to the Camp, boat launch and the dry hydrant. It will also prevent dangerous

visibility issues created by parked vehicles which can contribute to pedestrian accidents. In addition, such a parking restriction has the security advantages discussed in the next section. Banning parking on Camp Road also addresses the safety concerns surrounding the initial removal of and securing of buildings on the premises. With no parking on Camp Road and the off road parking gated, it is less likely that people will use the property prior to the cleanup.

Other signage, such as marking the perimeter of the property will alert hikers etc. that they are leaving the Camp and “No Motorized Vehicles” signage at the boat launch and known entry points of powered vehicles, will also be necessary.

Suggestions for safety on the grounds include the stocking of an infirmary which depending on the scale of future use may be warranted. Also, at a minimum each building for public use should have a stocked first aid kit. The Committee also discussed the value of a lifeguard if and when the pond is adequately cleared and approved for swimming.



Security Issues:

A number of security issues were brought to the attention of the Committee. The greatest financial risk to the project is the continued vandalism of the buildings, both now and after preservation of the camp structures. Beyond physical damage to the property, the three most commonly raised issues by the

public are: nocturnal visitors (mostly arriving by car) making inappropriate use of the property, the use of gasoline powered motorized vehicles on the property, and people who walk on the property and wander into the private yards of the abutters. These concerns were discussed with the Resident State Trooper, who provided commentary on the degree of effectiveness of the various suggestions under discussion. The Committee also reached out to other communities with similar venues and discussed the security measures in place. The Committee also received input from people living near the camp. Their descriptions indicated that when the camp was in operation, nighttime traffic and other issues seemed to take place with much less frequency than after the property was vacated.

Committee's Security Recommendations:

In reviewing the options discussed to address the security concerns, it is clear that banning parking on Camp Road coupled with dusk to dawn gated parking on the site itself would help to keep people off the property. This could lessen the potential for vandalism to the buildings during nighttime hours. The effectiveness of this response is highly reliant on enforcement, and based upon discussions with the Resident State Trooper, neither the Town nor Troop C have the resources to increase patrols in the area. Police can respond to calls from neighbors, but foliage and the general isolation of the area limit the likelihood of this being an effective deterrent unless the trespassers make significant noise.

It was noted by the Committee that the camp prior to closing successfully used an on grounds “caretaker” to monitor the property.

This model is used by 2 of the 5 other programs reviewed by the Committee. The Resident State Trooper concurred that a “caretaker” or other person living on site would be the most effective method of securing the property and deterring trespassers. The Trooper further indicated that a number of troopers occupy such housing throughout the state at a free or reduced rent, and that this arrangement had worked to the benefit of both parties. While there is an advantage to having a police presence on site, the programs reviewed by the Committee used either a staff housing model or rented to a “caretaker” and did not use sworn officers. It is the finding of the Committee that in terms of asset protection and limiting off hour or inappropriate use, a live in “caretaker” is the most effective way of protecting the Camp and reestablishing it as a “good neighbor.”

The Committee also discussed use of the property by the State Police to train or exercise dogs with signage indicating their presence, alarms, motion sensitive lighting and other measures (appendix 2) to support anti-vandalism efforts. It is the recommendation of the Committee that these measures initiated in concert with a “caretaker” and parking ban provide the greatest reduction of risk to the property. The Committee also recommends that during the off season, some sort of shuttering be employed to windows and doors to deter illegal access.



Potential Uses:

Based upon community input and Committee discussions, the following list of potential activities was developed. This list is not intended to be exclusive of other uses or inconsistent with policies concerning the use of Town property.

1. Scout group camping
2. Expansion of the town summer camp
3. Use by theater groups
4. Use by non-profits
5. Family functions (picnics reunions etc.)

Committee Use Recommendations:

The committee found that communities that we approached all report that their buildings in similar locations are revenue neutral or advantageous. The committee has noted significant community interest, not only in the preservation of the property, but in taking an active part in its preservation. It is the finding of this Committee that a rehabilitated Camp Aya-Po would be capable of self-sustaining the infrastructure of the Camp as well as the maintenance of the open space. It is the recommendation of this Committee that the Board of Selectmen create a Development Committee charged with securing sufficient funding to complete the project. The actual scope of the project will depend greatly upon the amount of financial and in-kind support that the groups who have expressed interest in preserving building can actually provide the Committee as the following specific recommendations concerning buildings:

That the “caretaker” house be the first building restored and it be occupied as soon as possible. Its occupied presence will protect construction materials and completed work.

That every effort be made to preserve the buildings known as “Avery” and “Hilltop” and that the Development Committee work closely with Town staff to determine if the freestanding restroom model is the most efficient use of resources or is it wiser to place the facilities in “Avery” and “Hilltop” and remove or repurpose the existing restroom structure.

The committee also recommends that should sufficient resources be available the preservation of the boat house be considered as a maintenance building for the open space. It is anticipated that use of Hi Pease Pond will be popular and this will allow the

storage of safety equipment in close proximity to the water.

The Committee also recommends that a separate 501-c-3 corporation be formed to manage the care, maintenance and development of the Camp and the adjacent open space. The corporation could take private donations for the benefit of the properties and assume the role of steward similar to the use of volunteer stewards by the land trust. This organization can also provide recommendations to the Town concerning trail development, insurance for volunteer work crews and ensure the property remains a valuable community asset.

The Committee wishes to thank the citizens of Somers whose comments and suggestions helped guide the process, Town staff who provided technical expertise, and the individuals from surrounding communities who highlighted the regional importance of Camp Aya-Po. The public support and encouragement received by the Committee speaks well for the long-term success of this endeavor.

Respectfully Submitted:

Bradley Pellissier
Chair

Patrice Carson
Secretary

Barbara Capuano

Ed Giza

Dominic Wilson

Steven Squillace
Vice Chair

Walter Nieliwocki
Editor

Lucas Cherry

Ken Coelho

Summary Response to Selectmen's Charge

Primary Focus – Suggest strategic goals and objectives for the recreational use of the property.

1. Safe public foot and bicycle access for passive recreational use of the open space.
 - a. Clear trash and debris from the property prior to opening to public use.
 - b. Design a trail network that provides access to the property while maintaining a respectful distance from private land.
 - c. Provide and maintain signage identifying the borders of the property and restriction for use. Signage should be placed to insure people can see when they are leaving the property as well as when entering.
2. Safe access to Hi Pease Pond for fishing, boating and potentially swimming.
 - a. Clear trash and debris from the water prior to opening to public use.
 - b. Provide adequate signage and enforcement to insure the boat launch is clear for fire department use.
 - c. Work with DEEP to encourage the stocking of the pond.
3. Restore key structures for use by families and civic organizations in facilitating their enjoyment of the camp grounds.
 - a. Develop a coalition of neighbors, civic organizations and Town staff, to secure commitments of funds and talent and develop restoration plan consistent with available assets.
 - b. Develop a use policy that protects the passive recreation nature of the surrounding land, and promotes responsible stewardship of the property and surrounding community.

Secondary Focus – Suggest plans for security and the reduction of vandalism.

1. Restore and occupy the “caretaker’s house” at the entrance to the property.
2. Gate vehicle access points to the property and parking areas and close gates at night unless a formally permitted activity (scouts camping etc.) is taking place.
3. Post and enforce no parking on Camp Road.
4. Shutter buildings during the off season.
5. Install motion sensitive lighting.
6. Offer State Police access to the property for K-9 training.

Tertiary Focus – Suggest plans for maintenance and upkeep of the property.

1. The Town-held part of the camp property can support itself and the adjacent open space in the following ways:
 - a. Given that the occupant of the “caretaker’s house” has no formal duties other than to call the police should they observe trespassers, the Town should be able to charge near fair market rent for the house.
 - b. Fees for use of the buildings and the Town parcel by families and civic groups will provide income.
 - c. Provided the Town develops a mechanism for taking donations, the regional history of the camp is likely to draw sustaining donations.
 - d. The potential for expansion of the town’s summer camp program will allow the community to serve more children.
2. Revenues from the camp and donations for its benefit should be dedicated to the maintenance and upkeep of the camp, similar to the open space fund so that monies are available in the future for long term maintenance needs.
3. A nonprofit or other appropriate independent entity should be created to advise the Town on the needs of the property and as much as possible conduct minor trail and property maintenance utilizing volunteers.