

Camping for kids is a priority for me and should be for the state

One of the greatest honors for me as Executive Councilor for District 1 is representing the towns around Lake Winnepesaukee, one of New Hampshire's most stellar natural resources. My district also covers many other beautiful lakes and ponds in the Lakes Region and the North Country. Those water bodies, and the big lake, are home to well over a hundred summer camps for kids. As a boy, I was a camper and then a worker at Pierce Camp Birchmont on Lake Wentworth, and I cherish the memories I have of those summers and the skills I learned as a camper.

Right now, Camp Menotomy, a 95-acre property on Lake Winnepesaukee, which hosted Girl Scouts for more than 75 years, is the subject of an intense legal battle in Massachusetts. It is possible that this undeveloped, near mile-long stretch of shoreline could become the site of new multi-million-dollar homes. The rustic cabins, campfire rings and mess hall that generations of campers used could be replaced



Hon. Joe Kenney

with more residential development on a lake that is unquestionably overdeveloped now.

After COVID-19, when camping everywhere declined, the Girl Scouts of Eastern Massachusetts decided not to renew their lease of the Camp Menotomy property. The trustees, who manage the property for the charitable trust, then decided to sell the land, circumventing the original trust document that clearly states it can only be sold if no other entity offers to operate it as a camping property. Camp operators have come forward in the past two years with proposals to continue operating Menotomy as a camping property, but their offers have been rebuffed. The trustees appear to be intent only on a quick

and extremely profitable real estate sale, not on their responsibilities to fulfill the purpose of the trust.

This is a deeded and restricted trust property recorded in Belknap County. I have recently met with the New Hampshire Attorney General and his staff, who are wrestling with the paper trail but who have not yet engaged in the legal proceedings in Massachusetts. I respect and appreciate the work they have done, but I want to see our Attorney General step in and demand a fair and transparent process, which we have not seen so far. I want New Hampshire to stand up and enforce its charitable trust law, which requires the trustees to adhere to the terms of the trust, no matter how the deeds were transferred to it. I do not want to see New Hampshire cede its authority to Massachusetts, when the property is here in our state, on our lake and in my district.

One sticking point seems to be defining the "fair market value" of the property. The true value of

this property should not be based on what a developer is willing to pay, or on what an appraiser hired by that very same developer estimates as its worth. Already, we have seen building lots on Winnepesaukee with just 400 feet of frontage on the lake sell for many millions. The value of the intended purpose of the Camp Menotomy property, as stated in the trust deed, is what should be measured — and the impact it has had on the hundreds of campers, staff and families whose lives were touched by and improved by this New Hampshire camping experience.

I urge the state to encourage the trustees to work with the offers from other camp operators. If those negotiations don't work out, New Hampshire should demand that the trustees start the whole process over again and adhere to the language in the trust. They should be required to do what they neglected to do earlier: actively seek other camp operators to take over the property. Dedicated children's

camp operators are out there and are anxious for the opportunity to reopen Menotomy. And no matter what the proponents of development say — that "kids aren't interested in camping these days" and that "the world has changed" — the numbers tell the real story: camps all over our state have waitlists and they turn away camping hopefuls all the time. I hear camp attendance is up 18 percent or more this summer.

Preserving this property for hundreds of kids who need more outside time and less screen time makes more sense to me than seeing it transferred to a handful of one-percenters who seem to want lakefront McMansions for status reasons rather than for really enjoying the outdoors. We have a tremendous opportunity here to preserve a special and irreplaceable part of our state. Let's not drop the ball on Camp Menotomy.

Executive Councilor Joe Kenney, R-Union, represents District 1.