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Bette Higley: Don't let Camp Menotomy sale become the playbook for breaking trusts

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The proposed sale and potential development of Camp Menotomy on Lake Winnepesaukee — a 95-acre property with 4,500 feet of shoreline — raises serious questions about whether those entrusted with protecting this irreplaceable camping property have fulfilled their legal and moral obligations. The facts available to the public suggest they have not.

In 1961, an independent trust structure was created to protect the Camp Menotomy property's long-term use as a camp for girls. The trust's governing language anticipated the possibility that camping operations could be threatened, and specific procedures were prescribed to preserve the property's future as a camping facility before any sale could occur. The 1961 trustees could have elected to transfer property ownership directly to the Girl Scout organization — who leased the camp until COVID-19 — but they did not. They sought to ensure the property would remain a camping property. That intent matters.

In October 2025, the current Camp Menotomy trustees filed a petition with the probate court in Massachusetts to seek approval to sell the property, asserting that they could no longer operate it as a camp because the facilities were outdated and no suitable camp operator could be found. The trustees — all of whom live in Massachusetts — had entered into a purchase-and-sale (P&S) agreement with a local developer before advertising the property for sale, for just one day in February 2024, without conducting any search for other camp operators, as required by the Trust deed.

The trustees' claims that they made a good-faith effort to fulfill the Trust's intent are difficult to reconcile because at least one well-established camp organization has submitted multiple proposals since 2024 to make a substantial capital investment and annual lease payment to operate the property as a camp. That organization's proposals have been ignored, and its director's efforts to discuss the offer have been dismissed by the trustees and their attorneys.

The charitable trust divisions of the attorneys general offices in both New Hampshire and Massachusetts should demand documentation, transparency and clear evidence that the trustees actively pursued every reasonable avenue to preserve the charitable purpose of the Trust. Trustees of charitable organizations are expected to act in good faith, to exercise due diligence and to carefully steward charitable assets in accordance with the intentions of those who created the Trust. They have a fiduciary duty not only to the beneficiaries of a charitable trust but also to the public interest.

Allowing a charitable trust to disregard its purpose and bypass its own terms in order to convert a camp into private development would send a troubling message that donor intent, deed restrictions and charitable obligations may be set aside whenever liquidation becomes more profitable and convenient. Such a precedent would weaken public trust in charitable institutions throughout both New Hampshire and Massachusetts and put at risk many trusts and many camps.

The charitable trust divisions in both states should carefully review the Camp Menotomy trustees' actions, scrutinize the evidence presented to the court by asking tough questions and ensure that the original purpose of the Trust is fulfilled. Any proposal from a qualified camp operator that includes leasing the property, supporting the Trust financially, maintaining the property and continuing campership grants and camping opportunities requires serious consideration. Importantly, were it to remain a camp, the Trust would continue to own an improved property at no cost.

But this debate is about more than donor intent with specific charitable purposes; it is about the mission to ensure the gift of outdoor camping experiences for generations of children over many lifetimes. When health and wellness are paramount to child development, and when a camp has stepped up to offer a camping experience for our kids, we need to honor the Trust as written, protect its mission and save this camp.

New Hampshire taxpayers have effectively supported this charitable, deed-restricted trust property through favorable tax treatment for more than 80 years. The state and the public have an interest in ensuring that this charitable asset, having received such benefits, remains devoted to the purposes for which those benefits were granted and which the Trust demands.

At the heart of this current controversy is a simple question: Did the Camp Menotomy trustees exhaust all options to preserve the property's intended use as a camp for girls, as the Trust intends, before agreeing to sell it to a private developer? Camp Menotomy was never intended to be a bank

account for trustees or a windfall profit to fund the corporate headquarters of a larger Girl Scout organization. It was intended to preserve a priceless natural resource and ensure a camping experience on our beautiful Lake Winnepesaukee.

Bette Higley lives in Meredith.