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TOP STORY

Campground for RVs gets zoning's permit

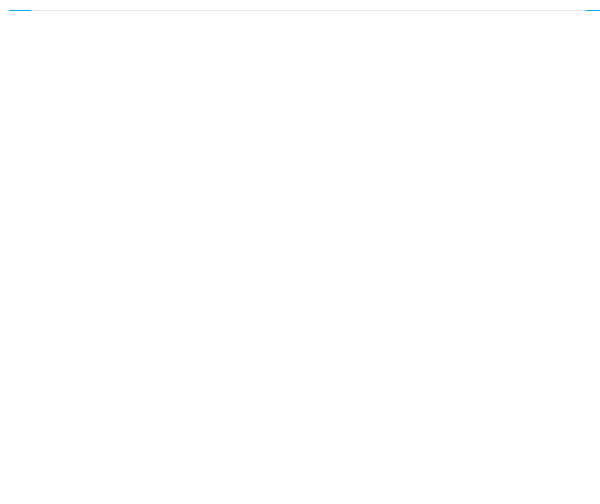
BY JULIE HUSTVET

Mar 4, 2021

TOWN OF SPOONER— A proposed 200-site seasonal RV campground is another step closer to being built after the Washburn County Zoning Committee approved a conditional use permit for it on a 540-acre parcel alongside Spooner Lake.

The unanimous decision on February 23 came after a nearly-4-hour-long hearing about Steve Austin and Michael Hershberger's plan to turn the Gene Thompson Trust property into a campground for RVs, complete with private onsite wastewater treatment systems (POWTS), wells, roads, trails, shower houses, and parking.

The application brought with it a host of opposition, especially from the Spooner Lake District and its members.



With 160 cabins and homes on the lake, the campsites potentially could double the population accessing the lake, and that spurred fears that the increased population density beside the lake would be a drain on human and environmental resources and would be detrimental to the quality of the lake, its serene appeal, property values, fish and wildlife, the wetlands that weave around the camp sites, and infrastructure such as roads and the boat landing.

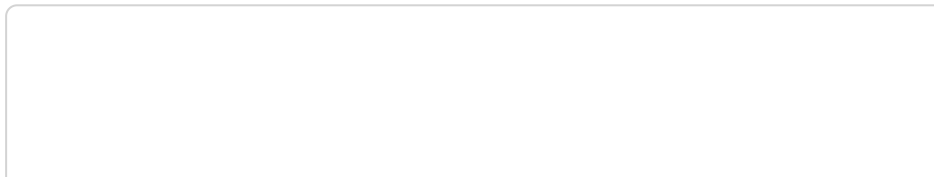
"This is not a thoughtful request for a conditional use permit," John and Elaine Rickerd said in a letter to the committee. "This is a corporate request for an unmitigated exploitation of wilderness property at the expense of current residents whose property values and quality of life will be affected by their action. Their request is inappropriate in scale and application."

Another letter writer, Sherrie Wiegand, wrote: "Please review the Zoning Ordinance which is designed to promote and protect the public health, safety, and general welfare by guiding orderly expansion of growth and development and protect environmentally sensitive lands, natural beauty, preventing pollution and preventing conflicts between different uses."

In contrast to those who maintained that the project does not accomplish those goals, a smaller number of people publicly applauded it as a benefit to the county and township's tax base and support of local businesses.

A project has to meet certain criteria in order to be awarded a conditional use permit, and the committee said the Spooner Lake Campground meets the criteria of location, nature, and size of the proposed use; its size in relation to the use; the location with respect to roads; and the compatibility with the surrounding environment and harmony with the future environment and development, the existing topography and drainage, vegetative cover, and its relationship to the public interest.





The zoning committee attached a number of conditions to the permit:

> It must meet all Wisconsin Admin Code Ch. ATCP 79 requirements, which are enforced by state personnel or their agent, all sanitary requirements of the sanitary ordinance and Wisconsin Administrative codes, and any other applicable county, state and federal codes.

The campground also must comply with the county sanitary maintenance program.

> The owner will work with Washburn County Land Information Department to develop a numbering system that is compatible with the 911 system for each individual site and will pay for the installation and maintenance.

> A campground map shall be on file in the zoning office with the campground layout, campsite locations, roads, property lines, required setbacks, structures, water supplies, private waste disposal system, recreation areas, and any other information that the zoning committee decides is necessary before construction.

Any proposed changes in the approved campground shall be presented to the zoning office for approval. None of the changes can take place until written approval is received from the zoning office.

> Land use permits shall be required for all accessory structures and facilities (such as sheds, decks, screen porches) and shall conform to the provisions of division 27 of chapter 38 of the Washburn county code. Both landowner and the renter are responsible and will be fined, if violations occur.

> Camping units shall meet all Wisconsin camping unit requirements.



> A copy of the state campground license must be given to the zoning office before any land use will be granted.

> Any other conditions the zoning committee deems necessary.

> Annual compliance inspections, with a report to that committee at its June meeting.

Campground

The campground will be the largest in the county. The developers said in an overview that the professionally managed campground's sites will average 50 feet by 80 feet deep and will be 1,200 feet from Spooner Lake and more than 300 feet from Evergreen Lake, which is on the property. They will be situated on the 220 acres of upland, 25 feet from the wetlands, per county requirements.

Water in the campground will be shut off late October to May, depending on the weather, in keeping with the campground's seasonality. Camping units can remain year-round, and the developers said that would minimize site disturbance and traffic.

No on-site boat launch is planned, and boats going onto the lakes must be cleaned and examined for invasives before launching.

The developers said they have given the zoning department and committee a list of 23 rules for the campground, including ones governing quiet hours, no hunting or fireworks, site maintenance, and boat cleaning.

The cost for not following the rules, they said, would be losing the right to use the site and losing their seasonal fee.

Multiple septic systems will be installed rather than one for the whole campground, and the systems will have to meet state standards.



The developers said the campground is compatible with the area's existing uses, which are recreational and nature-based, and buffers will be in place between campsites, lakes, and other land uses.

The county's conditional use permit approval is just one step in the campground's development; the state has a much broader regulatory role.

The overview noted the campground also will have "Community oversight – under a microscope."

Tourism

Tourism-related entities were strong supporters of the project.

The Churchill family and their Round Man Brewing Co. sent a letter in support.

Noting the challenging year just past, they wrote in a letter to the committee: "The thought of boosting our local tourist population, however far out that timeline may be, would be nothing short of a meaningful and impactful win for us during a challenging time."

They said a National Park Service 2018 analysis said the average per-person expenditure per trip equates to \$324 in local spending. With only one person at each campsite, that could bring in \$64,800 to the county in one trip, a benefit to grocers, bars, restaurants, gas stations, and retail stores.

The family said while they are considerate of the concerns surround the project, they believe the economic and community benefits outweigh them.

They also highlighted another opportunity: Bringing in a younger, more progressive demographic. A study they cited said 71% of campers are young people and their families.



Michelle Martin, director of Washburn County Tourism Association agreed with the benefits.

"One of our vital needs in the area is for lodging, specifically campgrounds and resorts," she said. Without more, people will go elsewhere.

She said an average overnight visitor to Wisconsin spends \$206 a day, while a day-tripper spends \$69.

"It is clearly to our advantage to have enough lodging to support our thriving tourism," Martin said. "Tourism brought in just over \$30 million in direct visitor spending in 2019. As a destination, our area has a lot of potential for growth, but it will take all of our leaders embracing the tourism industry and recognizing it as a major contributor to our economy to gain that momentum."

The committee received 30 letters opposing the project.

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