



THE CALEDONIAN-RECORD

Monday, December 14, 2009

Dream Of Lakeshore Refuge Needs Support

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DERBY - Michael Dunn hoped to leave his spectacular Eagle Point property on Lake Memphremagog for the public to enjoy - all 480 acres of wetlands, forest and farmland.

Dunn died in 2007 and left the lakefront land to the U.S. government with the understanding that the land be held for at least 50 years in an open state and be accessible for hikers and campers.

But that dream might not come true without public backing, said Gil Livingston, president of the Vermont Land Trust.

"Michael Dunn offered a spectacular legacy for Vermonters and the nation," Livingston said. "It's important for the local community to support this."

The U.S. government has to accept the land by Sept. 1, 2010, or it will go to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and be sold for the proceeds. The Museum received the rest of Dunn's estate of \$10 million and art works in the largest unexpected gift of its kind in the museum's history.

Dunn, who inherited family money, amassed far greater wealth after successful investing ventures. He made a fortune as an early investor in Warren Buffett's company, purchasing Berkshire-Hathaway A-shares at \$35 each which today sell for \$130,000.

The Vermont Land Trust, with the backing of the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, has asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to accept title to Dunn's Eagle Point property. In Quebec, 400 acres on the border have been offered to the Quebec government to own and manage.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials say they are preparing a preliminary proposal that would include state management of the land.

Now, Livingston said Friday, the Land Trust and the state need local residents to tell their congressional delegation and the federal government what public access to this eastern shore of Lake Memphremagog would mean.

Already, two local groups have expressed support: the Memphremagog Watershed Association, working hard to preserve or redevelop natural shoreline for the health of the lake, and the Northern Forest Canoe Trail, which links rivers and trails across northern New England.

The canoe trail needs a good natural camping site on the lake, and the Eagle Point property, with its natural cove near the old farm house, is a perfect fit, Livingston said.

Livingston toured the site recently with several Newport City and Derby officials, state officials and wildlife activists to identify wetlands, access for canoe landings, hiking trails and camp sites.

Eagle Point sites on the Vermont-Quebec border. Dunn's Vermont property includes 260 acres of wetland, woodland and

river shoreline, 220 acres of agriculture land that has been farmed for generations, and more than a mile of lakeshore land. It supports wildfowl and wildlife, some like bobolink, American black duck and blue-winged teal, all on the list of Vermont Species of Greatest Conservation Need.

Dunn, who moved to Vermont from Quebec in 1978, collected art, watches and land, said his friend, Stephen Marsh, the president and CEO of Community National Bank. Dunn served on six non-profit boards with Marsh.

"When it came to his land he always had an interest in wildlife and in making it available for hiking, hunting, and fishing," Marsh said.

"Michael told me that he hoped to leave the land to the government so people could continue to enjoy it."

The Vermont Land Trust wants the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to accept the land and allow the state to manage it as a national wildlife refuge. The state has two National Wildlife Refuges, the Conte in Essex County and the new Missisquoi refuge.

The state also has the South Bay Wildlife Management Area on the lake.

Once the federal government has the land, then the state and land trust would ask the community to discuss how the land can be preserved and used recreationally at the same time.

But it takes time for the federal government to respond to such opportunities.

"We have to maintain momentum, Livingston said.

He urged local residents to contact U.S. Sens. Patrick Leahy and Bernie Sanders and Rep. Peter Welch.

"They are all ready to lobby for this," Livingston said. "They are curious to see what the reaction of the local community will be."

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