

## Possible Sale Of Land Tracts In Camp Merz Stirs Controversy

By ALPHA HUSTED

5/31/02 - A decision by Boy Scout officials to market two tracts of land within Camp Merz, a 400-acre scouting preserve, have stirred a budding controversy.

The camp, located on Route 394, just outside Mayville, has been in operation since 1935, two years after the property was donated as a gift for Boy Scouts by the late Frank Merz, a Jamestown banker.

Parcels listed for sale by Real Estate Advantage include about 225 acres at the rear of the camp complex, and approximately 500 feet of lake-front acreage.

John Wojciechowicz, executive director of the Allegheny Highlands Boy Scout Council, said the Council has more land than it can use or support.

Proceeds from the sale of tracts "that are never used for our camp" are needed to boost the Council program to standards set by the National Boy Scouts of America, the official said Thursday.

Wojciechowicz said the Council faced a budget deficit of \$24,000 this year. In addition to an operating budget of \$622,000 for 2002, he added, the organization must cover capital costs. The official said the Council's annual endowment is about \$1 million. Endowment, he said, refers to annual gifts, donations, bequests and community contributions, all of which make up the financial support of the Council. "But keep in mind," he said, "our endowment should be up to \$2.3 million, under a formula established by the National Boy Scouts."

Wojciechowicz said the formula calls for an annual endowment based on \$450 per registered traditional scout. He said the Council now includes more than 5,000 traditional scouts, and about 1,000 who are non-traditional, including enrollment in the Explorer program and other school-related scouting programs.

"The Council is not facing a financial crisis, at this point, and the board's strategic plan will now provide a road map that will cover the next five years and enable us to avoid a problem in the future," the Council official added. Wojciechowicz said current economic conditions had resulted in reduced contributions for a number of non-profit organizations

William Briggs, the Council's vice-president of finance and a member of the Council for 11 years, took another tact in comments on the land-sale issue. "In a nutshell," he said, "the Council is asset rich \_ in terms of land \_ and cash poor.

"The Council absolutely does not want to sell any part of the land, and we're hopeful we can raise the funds we need through sale of only the lake-front parcel. This would still leave us a portion of land-front property to meet our scouting needs."

Alluding to some protests and questions, Briggs said he believed "a number of people see those signs and mistakenly think the entire camp property is up for sale. Nothing could be further from the truth. We want only what is best for the camp. If anyone or organization out there should come up with a donation that would fill our needs, we won't sell any of the land and all bets are off.

“There has never been any intent on behalf of the Council, to keep this thing under wraps. After months studying the strategic plan, we made the decision at our May 21 meeting to list the land as soon as possible, since this is the prime season for marketing realty, especially lake-front land.” Some scoutmasters, including Andy Cesarz of Mayville and Martin Young of Westfield, say they are opposed to the sale of any amount of the land. Moreover, they insist the Council should have first informed them of its decision.

“We should have been told — and even the communities who have scouts should have been told — so that we could have had some kind of opportunity for input,” Cesarz said. “For one thing, the Council should look at all ways it could trim the budget, especially in the area of salaries.”

The scoutmaster said he “first heard about the sale Saturday night, when a friend told me about the signs along Route 394. Before that, I didn't have a clue.”

In a communication mailed Wednesday to each of the Council's 63 scoutmasters, Cesarz wrote: “If the land is sold, we will never get it back ... Property is the one asset that must never be sacrificed to balance the budget, endowment or no endowment.”

“For more than 60 years, through much harder times than these, Camp Merz has been maintained. We cannot let it be parceled off on our watch ... What would Frank Merz say about squandering his most precious gift?” he wrote.

Young said he had been involved with scouting for 11 years. “I'm not against camp and scouting improvements, but selling land is a quick fix ... and, if the land is sold, I think it should be used strictly for camp (Merz) improvements.”

Wojciechowicz said he is confident the issue will ultimately be resolved. “There is a lot of emotion tied to scouting camps ... a number of families have sons, fathers and even grandfathers who have camped there ... It's the kind of feelings that run deep.”

About eight months ago, the council official said, copies of the strategic plan were mailed to all scoutmasters. In that document, he added, were references to appraisal of camp land.

Although specific plans to market the land had not been sent out, Wojciechowicz, said, he had informed all “unit leaders” about the sale, in a communication mailed on Wednesday. In the letter he wrote: “The Council has the right of refusal of any offer, and will not sell additional property once our goal of doubling our endowment has been achieved. ... Please understand the property we are offering for sale is not and has not been used for our programs. Our executive board is taking action to strengthen the future of scouting, and endowment growth is how to do that.”

A Council finance study included within the strategic plan, covering a five-year period, indicates a total of \$870,000 is needed for capital improvements for Council office, camps and programs. The plan also calls for an assistant scout executive position to be added in 2005, for which \$70,000 a year will be needed annually from that point on.

In addition to Camp Merz, the Council includes the Elk Lick Scout Reserve near Smethport, Pa., and the Kruson Training Center, near Wellsville.