Big Year Ahead At Historic Barns Park

By Craig Manning | Jan. 4, 2020

2020 will be a big year for the Historic Barns Park: A new road construction project, a potential millage renewal campaign, and several new additions to the Botanic Garden are all on the docket.

The 56-acre Historic Barns Park at the Grand Traverse Commons consists of three nonprofit organizations: the Botanic Garden, the TC Community Garden, and SEEDS. While each nonprofit manages part of the park, the property itself is owned by the Joint Recreational Authority, a municipal board established in 2004, when residents of the City of Traverse City and Garfield Township voted to acquire and maintain the Barns Park, Hickory Meadows, and a small parcel near the Open Space for $6.5 million. The millage is set to expire in 2024, but the Rec Authority could push to have a renewal on the ballot as early as August this year. Under state law, the Authority can only seek ballot measures in statewide general election years, which would leave 2022 and 2024 as additional options.

According to Rec Authority Executive Director Matt Cowall a 2020 ballot measure is likely – though not yet set in stone. Cowall says that, as the authority’s “known operating window” shortens, it risks becoming a “less attractive partner” for grants, community partnerships, and other sources of funding. He also notes the authority has worked with the city and township to draw up contingency plans for what will happen if the Rec Authority fails to secure a millage renewal by 2024. In that situation, Traverse City and Garfield Township would take over ownership of the three parks – something Cowall says all parties are eager to avoid.
“Based on the advice we’ve sought from both the city and the township, and based on discussions with the Recreational Authority Board, there is a sense that sooner is better [for seeking a ballot measure],” Cowall says. “But in order to work the process correctly – to be sure that locals would be well aware of an ask, and to fine-tune anything that might go on a ballot – we need to make that decision in short order. I would imagine we will decide one way or another by February.”

The question isn’t just about whether or not the Rec Authority will seek a ballot measure this year, but what the ask would be. Cowall says the current millage funding – equal to roughly $160,000 a year– is “insufficient” for maintaining the parks. As is, the millage money enables the Rec Authority to handle big picture items – such as maintenance of roads and parking lots, snow removal, trail care, and other structural upkeep – as well as the management and maintenance of the Cathedral Barn, a popular event space at Historic Barns Park. Most capital projects, though – such as the construction of any new gardens at the Botanic Garden – must be funded through other means.

The existing millage funds will pay for at least one major Barns Park project in 2020: the replacement of the roads around the park. Currently, the roads are no more than old State Hospital two-tracks. By late fall, the Rec Authority hopes to have built and paved new modern roadways to improve accessibility.

According to Karen Schmidt, board chair for the Botanical Gardens Society, design work for the new roads is already done. The Rec Authority will cover the expense of building the roads, projected to cost around $500,000 and start construction in late August.

Besides roads, the biggest projects at Historic Barns Park this year will take place at the Botanic Garden. In late 2019, the nonprofit completed a 61-foot stone labyrinth at the north end of the property. The labyrinth, which consists of 26,000 hand-cut pieces, is the first part of a new three-phase project: a wheelchair-accessible “Healing Garden.” Phase two, the planting of a Native American medicine wheel, will be completed in 2020, with the third phase – which will add landscaping and additional medicinal plants around the labyrinth and medicine wheel – to follow in 2021.

SEEDS, an organization that seeks to “implement local solutions to global issues at the intersection of ecology, education, and design,” is also eyeing new projects in 2020, including a potential expansion of its on-site solar power installations. According to Executive Director Sarna Salzman, SEEDS currently has two solar installations at Historic Barns Park. The first is a 4.5-kilowatt panel that, for several months in the summer of 2019, generated more than enough energy to power both the Cathedral Barn and the park’s irrigation system. The second, installed in 2019, is a six-fixture “pilot pathway lighting installation,” funded by the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians. Depending on the success of the pilot program, it could lead to a bigger solar project at Historic Barns Park in the near future. “If we like these lights, then that will be the way we do the path lighting for the whole new roadway plan,” Salzman tells The Ticker.