



Opinion

Marihelen Wheeler: Camp McConnell is a keeper

By Marihelen Wheeler/Special to The Sun

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Two-and-a-half years ago, the Alachua County Commission made the wise, courageous and, in my view, right decision to purchase Camp McConnell, the former YMCA camp.

Voter-approved Wild Spaces and Public Places sales tax dollars were used to pay the bargain purchase price of \$1.025 million for this 211-acre treasure. The property, located two miles north of Micanopy off U.S. 441, is an impressive mix of developed campground infrastructure and undeveloped wild Florida.

My interest in this land began before I was elected to the commission when, as a private citizen, I voiced my strong support for the purchase. Drawing on my experience as a teacher and environmental activist, I was convinced we should look at the many possibilities and benefits that owning such a property would afford.

Since becoming a commissioner, I have worked hard to convince the community and my fellow commissioners of the wisdom of the county retaining ownership of this valuable asset. I believe it will be of great benefit to the citizens of Alachua and surrounding counties.

In speaking with county staff, they agree that we have the resources to make this site ready and open for business should the commission elect to keep the facility. Funding is available for upgrades and renovations through Wild Spaces and Public Places.

At the Jan. 14 Alachua County Commission meeting, Camp McConnell is back on the agenda. There will be a comprehensive discussion that explores many possible uses of the property.

County staff members will present a Camp McConnell business plan. They will also report on the input and ideas received from many creative and caring citizens.

Ideas include a permanent site for the county Parks and Recreation Department, a home for Florida Wildlife Care, meeting places for 4-H, Boys and Girl Scouts and Youth Build opportunities.

We could host church retreats and revivals, music festivals, swim camps, cross country courses for track meets, soccer events, ropes course events, weekend retreats, weddings, restaurant service, and police and fire training.

Alachua County could make available a summer camp for kids who do not make the Camp Crystal list, environmental education for school children and adults, community gardens and orchards, arts and craft camps, folk culture activities and tailgating space with shuttles to University of Florida sports events. The camp facilities could be used to accommodate out-of-county mutual aid first responders to hurricane or fire disasters.

I envision this camp facility being repurposed as a county park to serve citizens and their recreational needs. Where much of the land being purchased by the county is undeveloped, this parcel is family-friendly, suitable for year-round use and able to accommodate a variety of populations. It is a peaceful place for families and organizations to roam and enjoy communing with nature, visiting Paynes Prairie and Lake Wauberg, and exploring and supporting Micanopy community businesses.

I am grateful for the local citizens and organizations who have expressed their support for retaining ownership and urge every to attend the meeting and to contact county commissioners to voice that support at 352-264-6920 or bocc@alachuacounty.us.

Assistant County Manager Gina Peebles is available to add your ideas to our list of possible uses. You can reach her at 352-538-8265 or gpeebles@alachuacounty.us.

Please join me in giving this gift to current and future generations by keeping, preserving and nurturing this beautiful and charming piece of authentic North Central Florida.

Marihelen Wheeler is an Alachua County commissioner.