

Creating a Vision: The Work of the Camping Opportunities Committee

The Des Plaines Valley Council Camping Opportunities Committee was chartered to examine and evaluate the need to upgrade the Council's camping programs. After more than three years, the Camping Opportunities Committee is narrowing its options and will present a recommendation later this summer on how to address the long-term camping needs of Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, and Venturers within the Des Plaines Valley Council. The recommendation, which will require Board approval and which will be subjected to close scrutiny in a number of presentations and town-hall meetings in the next two months, will stir debate and strong emotion, pro and con. The following summary of work done on camping program issues by the Council in 1999 and 2000 and by the Committee beginning in 2001 provides important details and the context within which the recommendation will be made.

Between 1993 and 1999, the summer camp programs at Shin-Go-Beek and Mach-Kin-O-Siew operated simultaneously with duplicate staffs. Such an arrangement provided a wider range of choices and programs but stretched budgets and staffing needs. In 1999, the programs were split: two weeks of Cub Scout camp and three weeks of Boy Scout camp at Shin-Go-Beek and three weeks of Boy Scout camp at Mach. This action was taken to reduce operating expenses, though it also cut down program options. To assess program quality and current camp conditions, independent inspections of Camp Mach and Camp Shin-Go-Beek were conducted. The separate reports on these inspections cited the need for major improvements, including a general renovation of most of the buildings at both locations and a new maintenance building, staff cabins, and COPE course at Shin-Go-Beek. The first discussions to create a separate Cub Scout area at Shin-Go-Beek were also held in 1999.

A Mission Statement Is Developed

In 2000, the board drafted a more formal mission statement that would govern its activities regarding the evaluation of the camps.

"Each of the camps in and of themselves is an attractive piece of camp property. However, attractiveness aside, we as a Council must periodically review the use and usefulness of our camps."

The statement also listed key questions the Board must answer in carrying out its responsibilities, including the following:

1. Are the camps used efficiently and by whom?
2. Are they used in accordance with BSA standards?
3. Do they meet the needs of the youth we serve?
4. Can they be improved to better serve our youth?
5. What is the potential growth in camp use?
6. What is the perceived future use for the camps?
7. What is the economic outlook of the camps?
8. What are potential improvements to the camp?
9. Should any or all of the camps be disposed of by sale or trade?

Also in 2000, the committee began the process of appraising all Council properties, including the Council Service Center in LaGrange. Plans were made to create drawings of each of the camps and how they could look if fully upgraded and what programs could be added.

The Camping Opportunities Committee is Created in 2001

The Camping Opportunities Committee was created in 2001 to bring greater focus to the issue of how to upgrade the Council's camping programs. The committee was made up of long-time Scouters, all of them past Council presidents. Meeting every couple of months, and more frequently when necessary, the committee began the process of evaluating the Council's camping programs and the roles each camp property played, with the goal of eventually making a recommendation for the camps' long-term future. During this time, the idea of selling one of the camp properties was examined more closely. The costs of operating and keeping up three camps were rising steadily and it was thought that selling one would reduce expenses and produce enough cash to upgrade significantly the other two.

In 2001 and 2002, the committee continued work toward developing a proposal to present to the Board, though much effort and resources were diverted to the cleanup of Shin-Go-Beek following the June 11, 2001 blowdown.

In 2003, plans to develop a viable recommendation on the long-term future of the Council's camping programs were stepped up. The chairmen of all four districts wrote to newly-elected Council President Bill Seith to express their concerns about conducting a fair, open, and thorough study of every available option regarding any camp property. President Seith responded, saying he was committed to doing just that.

The Camping Opportunities Committee began meeting every month, beginning in March, 2003. The committee first examined and discussed a report on the Council's record in serving Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts in a summer camp setting. The analysis indicated a number of weaknesses: a very low percentage of Cub Scouts (17%) participating in a summer camp (recommended BSA minimum is 27%); below average participation (50%) by Boy Scouts (national standard is 62%); and the fact that most programs are at or near capacity under current arrangements and could not accommodate greater numbers of current Scouts or expected growth (ten percent over next four years.)

The "Ideal" Boy Scout and Cub Scout Camps

The committee developed a checklist containing all the facilities in an "Ideal Cub Scout Camp" and an "Ideal Boy Scout Camp." (These lists are posted on the website under "Ideal Camp Facilities.") The committee then started to research the widest possible range of options to facilitate and fund camp programs that would 1) include those elements on the "ideal lists" and 2) produce higher percentages of participation by Scouts, especially Cub Scouts. The costs of these options were estimated to be as high as \$6M. To offset the costs, options were considered such as the sale of one or more existing DPVC properties to upgrade the remaining ones, the purchase or lease of land to develop a new camp, to purchase or lease an existing non-Scout camp property (YMCA or 4-H), -- or to partner with another Council on a new or existing property. The committee compiled a list of all available Boy Scout camps within 200 miles and contacted the respective Councils to open

discussions. After extensive research, it was concluded that finding new land suitable for a camp or the purchase of a non-scouting property was not feasible. The committee then opened discussions with neighboring councils, including Chicago Area, Rainbow, Three Fires, Northwest Suburban, Northeast Illinois, and Blackhawk Area Council, however none of these contacts elicited any serious interest in a joint-venture. As a result, the committee now turned its focus to the Council's own properties to come up with a solution.

During the summer of 2003, President Bill Seith sent a letter to all District and Committee Chairs, Commissioners, Unit Leaders, and Board Members discussing the Committee's work, its progress and when it hopes to finish. The letter also asked for feedback. At the same time, a special section was created on the DPVC website (www.bsa-dpvc.org) that included Seith's letter and a document containing many questions and answers on the issue.

Also during the summer, committee members visited the Council's Wisconsin camps and two noted Cub Scout camps: one run by the Samoset Council near Rhinelander, Wis. and one run by the Bay Lakes Council near Kiel, Wis.

In the fall, it was learned that a farm that borders Camp Tomo Chi-Chi Knolls was sold to the Kane County Forest Preserve. This move eliminated a major concern that the camp would eventually become encroached by residential developments. The committee then began to explore two separate options regarding Tomo. Option One was to sell Tomo to Kane County Forest Preserve and take the proceeds to upgrade the other two, and then possibly negotiate a lease-back in which the Council would be able to use at least part of the property for a period of time. Option Two was to develop Tomo into at least a Cub Scout camp, or even a Cub Scout and Boy Scout Reservation (provided that the lake that once existed on the property could be restored, and at a reasonable cost.) An appraisal for the value of Tomo was undertaken and contact was made with the Kane County Forest Preserve. At the same time, plans were made to conduct a study to determine the feasibility of restoring the lake.

Face-to-face meetings were also needed to elicit comments, concerns, and suggestions about the Committee's work and the options it was considering. A series of roundtables were held in each district. These produced some heated opposition to change of any kind, but for the most part those in attendance asked thoughtful and direct questions. Some were frustrated, too, because the Committee was still gathering information and had not yet arrived at any recommendation, so could only comment in general terms and not to any specific proposal.

In 2004, the Council received unsolicited interest from a developer on the purchase of Mach and/or SGB. Based on this interest, the Council contacted the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to determine its interest in the properties and their actual marketplace value. (DNR recently indicated that they had no interest in the property.)

In April, of 2004, it was reported that the Council had the authority to restore the old lake at Tomo and by June, a separate study indicated the lake could be restored at a reasonable cost. The Committee asked the National Engineering Division of the BSA to provide its recommendation including costs, based on an on-site inspection, on a single, or pair of properties that would fulfill all camping needs for the Council. The Engineering Division returned with a proposal for a totally redesigned Tomo Chi-Chi-Knolls that would include

separate Boy Scout and Cub Scout program areas. It is that proposal the Committee is now considering and will be the subject of debate over the summer.

The Concept of a Reservation

The term Scout Reservation is often used to describe a camp property that serves Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts. It may contain basic program offerings and may also include high adventure opportunities. Nearby reservations include Camp Loud Thunder near the Quad Cities and Rainbow Scout Reservation near Morris, IL.

The proposal presented to the Committee by the National Engineering Division, which includes detailed drawings and costs, was developed after several on-site inspections and research into what other Councils have done with a one-camp concept.

The advantages to a one-site reservation stem from the fact that all the financial and personnel resources are concentrated into one facility rather than spread over several sites. The concept works, of course, only if the facility meets a number of criteria, including being of a sufficient size and configuration and having a lake to support most aquatic activities. The Committee never considered the reservation model at Tomo until the National Engineering Division walked the property and showed how much of the camp could be used and how the former lake, now a marshland, north of the Lodge could be transformed back into a lake.

The reservation design (posted on this section as “Reservation Design”) uses much of Tomo’s 300 acres in two separate areas surrounding the new lake. It includes a new dining hall, pool, and expanded shower facilities.

The Boy Scout area includes high and low C.O.P.E. courses, BMX track, archery range, ecology and orienteering pavilions, campfire bowl, and six campsites large enough to accommodate over 300 scouts. The lake will also have a separate Boy Scout area for swimming, fishing, canoeing and kayaking.

The Cub Scout area includes four resident villages (campsites) to accommodate 80 scouts, themed areas (Native American venue with crafts and ecology, fort, BB Guns, range, kiln, and lakefront area for fishing and boating.

Specific program areas can be debated, however the concept of the reservation model is what is important: making Scouting accessible to the greatest number of boys.

The reservation model is but one option the Camping Opportunities Committee is now considering. The Wisconsin camps are still in operation and one or both camps could ultimately remain so in some form. Regardless of the options, money is and must be a critical consideration. Selling both Wisconsin camps will produce enough money to fund much of any necessary work. Selling only one or no camps will require a multi-million dollar fundraising effort. Focusing on just one property for camping also makes more effective use of resources and allows better control of operating costs.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT THE BSA PROPOSAL

Q. What is the Camping Opportunities Committee proposing?

No proposal has been made and will not be made until after a series of meetings this summer to gather comments and additional information from Scouters. What is under consideration is the vision of one-site reservation in a design prepared by the National Engineering Division of the BSA. That design, based on on-site inspections, outlines a developed Tomo-Chi-Chi Knolls, including a restored lake, that would include both Boy Scout and Cub Scouts program areas. The concept is to 1) have a camp reservation that is literally second to none in terms of its program opportunities, 2) that would be open for use by our Scouts and Scouters almost 365 days/year, 3) that would include, to the extent possible, the best attributes of all three of our current camp properties and a whole lot more.

Q. Why now?

The Camping Opportunities Committee, which has been researching ways to upgrade and fund our camp properties for the past three years, had set a deadline of last month to finish its work. The one-site reservation design offered by the BSA has pushed this deadline ahead by two months.

Q. Why is the sale of even one camp even being considered?

Operating three camp properties stretches available resources. All three camps need significant renovation. The likely success of a multi-million dollar capital campaign in the current economy is open to question. The sale of one or two properties would raise much of the funds needed to renovate the remaining ones. Besides, as stated before, the costs of operating and keeping up three camps were rising steadily and it was thought that by selling one or two of them would reduce expenses and produce enough cash to upgrade significantly the remaining camp(s).

Q. There are many options other than selling the Wisconsin properties. Why aren't they being considered?

Dozens of options have been considered over the last three years, including the purchase or lease of land to develop a new camp, to purchase or lease an existing non-Scout camp property (YMCA or 4-H), -- or to partner with another Council on a new or existing property. The committee compiled a list of all available Boy Scout camps within 200 miles and contacted the respective Councils to open discussions. After extensive research, it was concluded that finding new land suitable for a camp or the purchase of a non-scouting property was not feasible. The committee then opened discussions with neighboring councils, including Chicago Area, Rainbow, Three Fires, Northwest Suburban, Northeast Illinois, and Blackhawk Area Council, however none of these contacts elicited any serious interest in a joint-venture. As a result, the committee now turned its focus to the Council's own properties to come up with a solution.

Q. What is being done to make sure everyone has chance to express themselves on this issue?

In an effort to give everyone in the Council a full view of the vision and the opportunity to comment on it, members of the Committee will be making a presentation every week this summer at both SGB and Mach to the Scouts and Scouters in residence. There will also be presentations at Tomo on Sunday, July 25 starting at 2:00 PM and at a location near the center of Council in August. Part of the vision includes continued utilization of both SGB and Mach on at least a troop level basis and resurrecting a full size lake that once existed at Tomo. The presentations will include details on what a camp reservation could look like, what it would cost to build and how it would significantly add to the texture and depth of our camping programs. The presentation will also include information on numerous other alternatives that are still being explored by the Committee and how they compare to the camp reservation concept. The presentation will include information about our current financial picture and how the various alternatives being explored by the Committee would impact that picture. Finally, it will solicit comments and questions from Scouters that will be examined by the Committee and used in the formulation of any proposal to the Executive Board.

Q. Why not sell Tomo and use the profits to upgrade Mach and SGB?

That option was strongly considered and for a time it looked as though Tomo could be sold to the Kane County Forest Preserve and at least a portion of it leased back to the Council for short-term camping and training. Talks broke down, however, and the option did not remain viable.

Q. Why not develop Tomo as a Cub Scout Camp and keep Mach and/or SGB as a Scout Camp?

That option is still very much on the table. Both Wisconsin properties have a lot to offer and both enjoy strong support. The biggest obstacle, of course, is cost. This option is the most expensive one being considered (estimates of \$6-7 million) so there is obvious concern about the enormous financial challenge.

Q. If we adopt the Reservation model, will the camp be ready for the 2005 camping season? If not, what plans, if any, does the Council have as an alternative?

Probably not, so any final decision would have to extend the current camp arrangement.

Q. The positive aspects of Tomo as a Reservation have been given but what are the downsides?

The downsides have to do with space (it's smaller than both Mach and SGB) and that it is so close to home. Some troops will want to spend summer camp at a more faraway location. Most of Tomo has never been used so it's a lot larger than many people realize. Nevertheless, making Tomo work for everyone will require a great deal of planning.