

State Plan for Camp Hero Cabins Assailed

By JOHN KATHEN

THE state parks commissioner, Bernadette Castro, said last week that 415 acres of state land at Camp Hero near the Montauk Lighthouse should be opened to the public as soon as possible for uses that could include hiking, fishing and accommodations in cabins available for rent.

But in an indication of local sensitivity about the land's future, civic, community and business groups in Montauk oppose cabins as environmentally unsuitable, a strain on local water supplies and unwanted competition for local motel and hotel owners.

The oceanfront land, a former Air Force station and World War II coastal defense, has been closed since the state acquired it in 1964 in a land swap with the federal government that saved it from private development.

In July, Mrs. Castro dropped an earlier plan to develop the property as a public golf course, a use vehemently opposed by Long Island environmental groups and some Montauk groups but supported by most of the local motel and hotel owners.

Mrs. Castro said a recent agreement by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to speed up an environmental review of the property meant that public access for other purposes could be provided within the next three years, before her current term as commissioner expires.

The review will determine if there are contaminated areas that would have to be cleaned up before the public could enter. Mrs. Castro said she hoped that any clean-up required could be completed in the three-year period.

"My mission is to give the public access to what they own," Mrs. Castro said in a telephone interview. "I do not want to keep posting 'Do Not Enter' signs there. It's not fair to the people."

The former base, which is just west of the lighthouse, includes bluffs, wetlands and the remnants of an artillery battery and buildings camouflaged to look like a fishing village to deceive seaborne invaders who never came.

The Montauk Air Force Station, a radar installation, occupied Camp Hero after the war until it closed in 1961. A small portion of the former base was turned into an affordable housing project, where some Montauk residents opposed to the cabins now reside.

The fortifications include a system of underground bunkers. Mrs. Castro said the bunkers, which extend for several hundred yards, were "something the public deserves to see." She said a radar tower that was "beyond state-of-the-art in its day" was another point of interest, as were some of the remaining buildings in the false village. One building designed to look like a church is a gymnasium inside and would be preserved, she said.



The state is moving to make 415 acres of land available to the public at Camp Hero, which has such unusual buildings as a church, above, and a radar tower.



A mission by the state to give the people access to 'what they own.'

She said building 12 to 18 year-round cabins, each with room for up to six people, was only one of several possibilities on a list presented to a citizens' advisory group in December.

"This park will always have a passive tone to it," she said, using a term that implies light use and limited infrastructure. "There are not going to be grills for picnicking. There is not going to be a golf course."

She said that while there "perhaps" could be cabins, "the key word is perhaps."

But some members of the committee who attended the December meeting said Mrs. Castro seemed intent on building the cabins despite the local opposition.

"She warned us that she was not giving up on the idea as easily as the

golf course," said Lisa Grenzi, a member of the Camp Hero Advisory Committee and also chairwoman of the Montauk Citizens Advisory Committee.

Mrs. Grenzi said the latter group, which represented a spectrum in Montauk, unanimously opposed the cabins but favored increased access for trails and possible restoration of the bunkers.

"I think the feeling was we are really urbanizing our parks and there is a very severe water shortage at Camp Hero," Mrs. Grenzi said. She said she also expected the Army Corps would discover contaminants on the property that would have to be cleaned up before cabins could be considered.

But they should not be built in any case, she said. "The fear is if they put

in 18 cabins and if it's successful they will put in 18 more," she said.

Laurie Cocchi, executive director of the Montauk Chamber of Commerce, said cabins would hurt the local economy. "The state would be operating lodging units on a year-round basis that would compete with local private industry," she said. She said the cabins would especially harm motels and hotels that remained open during the winter months.

But concern was running high last week that Mrs. Castro would not be put off by local opponents or the advisory group, which rated cabins second-to-last, according to Mrs. Grenzi. In rating a list of potential uses.

Mrs. Grenzi said Mrs. Castro told members of the Camp Hero advisory panel that they had taken away her golf course and they would not take away her cabins. Her realization was the basis for a quote attributed to Mrs. Castro that was printed in the local weekly, The East Hampton Star.

Mrs. Castro denied she made the statement. "It was kind of hurt," she said. "I never said that."

"On my personal vacation I rented a house in Montauk and took my whole family there," she said. "I have a personal love for Montauk. I will do nothing that is not right for Montauk."

But the statement as printed in The Star touched a nerve. "She's a strong lady and she knows what she wants," said William D. Akin, the president of Concerned Citizens of Montauk. "But to say something like that is right off the chart. It's not a responsible statement for a public official to make."

Mr. Akin said the cabin proposal was rooted in a misguided philosophy that parks should be revenue producers. "But if you do a financial analysis of building the cabins and providing security, and assuming that they don't rent for \$200 or \$300 a night, I'm not sure it would even be a money-maker," he said.

Mrs. Grenzi said, "It's this last great piece of land, why does anybody have to do anything with it? Why can't we just leave it alone?"

But she said she favored public access and historic tours.

Though the land is gated, it is still frequented by hikers and fishermen who know access points. There is an extensive trail system.

Camp Hero is one of three state parks in Montauk, a favorite destination for tourists. The others are the 1,755-acre Ether Hills State Park and the 724-acre Montauk Point State Park.

The Ether Hills park, an expanse of woods and beaches that spans from the Atlantic shore to Napeague Bay, has 108 campsites that rented last year for \$18.50 a night during the season from early April to mid-November for periods of up to one week. The sites are booked each year months before the season opens. ■

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