



Cooperative efforts bring Barns Park history from past to present

The fight to save Grand Traverse County's former state hospital is now the stuff of legend.

When the state planned to demolish the massive buildings on the multi-hundred-acre property, residents were outraged. One attorney claims he waved a court order in the contractor's face, demanding that he stop immediately. Another resident swears he laid down in front of a bulldozer and dared the operator to keep going.

While some of these stories are debatable, everyone can agree that no single person or municipality can claim responsibility for the property's restoration. What had become a community albatross is now a major destination thanks to a multitude of collaborations and partnerships, including **Garfield Charter Township** (Grand Traverse Co.) and the City of Traverse City. Together, the two entities created a joint recreational authority to successfully campaign and pass a millage to renovate the old hospital farm. Today, the giant barns that once helped feed hospital patients and staff house a major wedding and meeting venue in the middle of what is now known as Historic Barns Park.

Soon, MTA members will have the chance to see Historic Barns Park up close. On Monday, April 23, attendees at MTA's Annual Educational Conference can tour the grounds and learn about how joint recreational authorities work at an Edutour hosted by **Matt Cowall**, executive director of the joint recreational authority. They'll also dig into how this unique public park is managed, including the collaborative approach to managing and improving the site, raising revenue, and regulating an event barn.

A vital partnership

Garfield Charter Township Supervisor **Chuck Korn** credits the recreational authority—and the hard work of private residents—with getting a project off the ground that many thought was impossible. "I don't think any one of us could have pulled this off alone," Korn said. "The partnership was vital to making this happen."

Just a few decades ago, no one would have imagined that the Traverse area site could become a Midwest destination. Built in the 1880s, the old state hospital provided mental health care and was the largest employer in Traverse City for the better part of a century. The massive grounds spanned hundreds of acres and included a large agricultural operation. Not only did the farm grow fruits and vegetables to feed more than 2,000 patients and staff daily, it was also a part of the hospital's treatment program. Patients were encouraged to get outside and help weed the gardens or milk the cows.

But when the hospital closed in 1989, the state wanted to demolish it. The Victorian-era buildings were laden with lead paint and asbestos, and restoring the property didn't make financial sense for the state. Local citizens, however, were firmly against demolition. The community had a soft spot in its heart for the property—nearly everyone knew someone who had worked there, and they didn't want to lose the natural beauty or the buildings that could never be replaced. Their protests finally won out, and Grand Traverse County bought the property from the state before transferring ownership to the newly created Grand Traverse Commons Redevelopment Corporation.

Then, the project came to a screeching halt. No one knew what to do with the blighted behemoth, or how to fund the costly clean-up it would take just to make the grounds reusable by modern standards. Proposals were submitted, but none were feasible. Would-be developers came and went, and residents' hopes were dashed over and over again. Some believed that talks of renovations would never come to fruition.

As discussions continued, it became clear that the project was too much for just one entity to handle. The former hospital straddled the line between Traverse City and Garfield Charter Township, and whatever happened to it would impact both municipalities.

"Having the third-party energy of the recreational authority focused on the old farm really helped to advance the site as far as it's gotten today," Cowall said. "I think it would have been harder to do if the property was absorbed into an existing parks system. The hyper-focus of the authority really helped the authority to do a lot over the years and leverage a lot of creative investments."

With the authority in place, the ball was rolling for the old farm. But the question remained: What exactly should be done with the barns? In 2004, the authority had successfully passed a small millage to operate Historic Barns Park and two other parklands, but that support alone was not enough to rehabilitate the old buildings and return them to public use.

A community vision turned reality

In 2007, the authority hosted an extensive series of public visioning sessions to brainstorm exactly what residents wanted to see done with the property. Citizens threw down a challenge: find a public use for the barns that could also help to support the ongoing operation and maintenance of the buildings themselves. With their high ceilings, sturdy construction and unique beauty, the old barns were practically made for hosting events. After vetting several different options, it was determined that event rentals would be the best shot at opening the structures to the public while also bringing in needed revenue.



The giant barns at the former state hospital in Grand Traverse County that once helped feed patients and staff are now a major Midwest destination wedding and meeting venue called Historic Barns Park.

Funding wasn't the only need. Many aspects of the public's vision for the park included experiences and programming that the authority wasn't equipped to provide on its own. That led to formal collaborations with three area nonprofits whose missions support that public vision, including The Botanic Garden at Historic Barns Park, SEEDS, and TC Community Garden. These partners help to manage and redevelop areas of the park while advancing their own missions on the site.

In 2010, armed with park partners and a business plan, the authority embarked on a three-year fundraising campaign to refurbish the Cathedral Barn's upper level for public events. Today, every loose nail and drafty crack are gone. In their place is a stunning space that regularly wows wedding guests and meeting attendees. "It's expansive. It's impressive," Cowall said. "You don't see buildings like that anymore."

The park is still a work in progress. For example, more development remains for the Cathedral Barn, and the recreational authority hasn't decided what to do with the second barn just yet. In the meantime, the adjacent Historic Barn is safe, completely free of contaminants and serves as a backdrop for the countless wedding photos taken on the park grounds.

Korn is proud of the park, of the gardens full of flowers and plants, of the trails leading over to the Village at Grand Traverse Commons, the ambitious private redevelopment of the old hospital's main buildings, now bustling with shops, restaurants, offices and condos. The partnership it took to pull off this project wasn't easy. It took years of cooperation, hard work and, yes, sometimes disagreements. But the end result was worth it. "There are always negotiations and give and take," Korn said. "Overall, it has been a good process."

Room is still available to register for the Historic Barns Park EduTour, held Monday, April 23, from 12:30 to 4:30 p.m. Use the Conference registration form or call the MTA office at (517) 321-6467 to register. For more about the Conference, turn to pages 17-20, or visit www.michigantownships.org/conference.asp.

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