

ROSENDALE

Residents rally 'round the lake

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Ulster County Press

A group whose goal is to "protect the natural resources of all the land included in the Williams Lake property and preserve it in perpetuity" has formed in response to a development company that is in negotiations to purchase the Town of Rosendale property.

According to members, the Friends of Williams Lake (FOWL) has gathered several times already and met with officials from

Canopy Development last week to discuss concerns about a plan to build an upscale, gated, resort community.

Little is actually known about the details of what Canopy Development plans on doing with the land after the pending sale is complete. So far, officials with the Massachusetts-based, luxury resort developer, have committed to little more than that plans for the Williams Lake property include an upscale, environmentally responsible, gated community.

That hasn't stopped the Friends of Williams Lake from launching a Web site that raises dozens of issues, concerns and questions about the future of the lake and associated property.

"We've had two lengthy meetings with (FOWL). They are authentically concerned with what's going to happen to Rosendale," Canopy Development President and CEO Tom Horton said. "The last meeting, they had a number of substantive and reason-



COURTESY PHOTO

A VIEW FROM the shore of Williams Lake in Rosendale.

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able concerns. We honestly don't have the answers yet."

But, Horton said, Canopy is dedicated to collecting input from residents, officials, conservation groups and other concerned parties in the town and use that information to develop solutions palatable to all.

"We're at the beginning of a process where we're willing to sit down with anyone who wants to talk with us," Horton said. "Rather than hearing things second hand, people can talk directly to us."

Canopy's efforts to establish an atmosphere of transparency around the project have so far received mixed reviews even from within FOWL itself.

Noelle Damon, a Rosendale resident and former member at Williams Lake, said she was pleased with the efforts being made by Horton and his company, but noted several concerns that still prevail.

"We were pleased to speak with them. This is a good start," Damon said. "We still have some grave concerns about the scope and size of the development."

Damon said the impact of developing the Williams Lake property (information from FOWL suggests that preliminary plans include a 100-room hotel and spa and 100 to 200 residential housing units) raises concerns about gentrification, public access, environment and town infrastructure.

"We have to make sure that this is done in a way that doesn't negatively impact the integrity of our

community," she said.

One suggestion the Friends of Williams Lake made to Horton was to tap into the philanthropic vein of Steve Case - AOL founder and head of Revolution, a company that owns a controlling interest in Canopy - to purchase the land and donate it to the state.

Damon said she was encouraged that Horton promised to bring that suggestion back to Case.

Other members of FOWL, though, had a different take on the beginning of what is sure to be a series of discussions, negotiations and public meetings between Canopy and the town.

"We're at opposite ends of the spectrum," New Paltz resident and former Williams Lake member Mark Raphael said about the meetings with Horton and Canopy Development. "We're looking to have continued access to the lake and preserve the lake. They're looking to create an exclusive enclave."

Raphael is skeptical of whether Canopy will even give local concerns due diligence.

"It doesn't seem like they will take our concerns into consideration," he said, citing a plan offered to Canopy to keep the lake open under local management while the parties iron out the details of the pending sale. That plan, he said, was declined.

Horton, though, pointed out that Canopy has already begun talks with Ulster County and others to hash out alternatives that address the concerns about public access to the Williams Lake property. One effort, he said, is focused on maximizing Rail Trail access on the land. But, Horton noted, Williams Lake was never really open for

public access anyway. People were required to be paid members to use the lake and associated facilities and land. Anyone else, Horton said, was trespassing.

Both Damon and Raphael said that even though Williams Lake was a private club, the community was still able to utilize it for things like fundraisers, weddings, meetings and sporting endeavors, among other things.

"There's quite a bit of difference between what they consider access and what we consider access," Raphael said.

Despite the yawning gap between the vision of each camp for the Williams Lake property, both sides are preparing to work together over the coming months.

Horton said Canopy hopes to finish collecting concerns and suggestions from individual, local officials and groups like FOWL by early fall of this year. Then, he said, the plan is to hold a series of public hearings. Ultimately, Canopy would look to aggregate everything and "integrate that body of information into our development plan."