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Rendering of proposed DEM Natural Resource Center at Browning Mill Pond in Arcadia Management Area in Exeter on Monday, Jan. 30, 2017. | Harold Hanka, The Westerly Sun

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EXETER — A group of residents is fighting a plan to build a natural resource center near the shore of Browning Mill Pond in the Arcadia Management Area, which lies in both Exeter and Hope Valley.

The 13,000-square-foot building would bring together the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management's fish and wildlife and forestry administrators, who are currently working out of several different facilities. The budget for the project will be up to \$7 million, and the ground-breaking is expected to take place in the spring.

Associate Director of Natural Resources Larry Mouradjian said consolidating administrators is necessary for the programs to operate efficiently. The wildlife management division had to leave the Oliver Stedman Government Center in Wakefield after 40 years, and staff are now scattered between offices at Great Swamp, Arcadia, and the George Washington campground in Gloucester.

"We have folks scattered pretty much in closets and small outbuildings around the state," he said. "So the notion that we would have an administrative office to represent those programs — it was necessary for us to consider a building. Arcadia and Browning Mill Pond having been a former parks and recreation facility if you remember, with buildings, and they used to operate a beach there. That location is centrally located between the Fish and Wildlife and forestry properties they manage all the way from Westerly up the western corridor through Burrillville and even up into Buck Hill."

The new center will be built on the site of the former park facilities.

"It's an Adirondack style," Mouradjian said of the building. "We want folks to have a sense of place, so being a wildlife, inland fisheries, forestry program, obviously this building will be reflective. It will be built into the slope so it's not an eyesore there."

Leaders of the Wood Pawcatuck Watershed Association said they are optimistic that the building will be unobtrusive.

"WPWA is pleased that the state is increasing its capacity to serve the public by constructing a welcome center at the popular Browning Mill Pond," Executive Director Christopher Fox said. "We were concerned that new construction will occur within the wetland fringe of Browning Mill Pond, but we are hopeful that it will be constructed in a responsible way such that there will be no negative impact to water quality at the pond."

The project is not without its detractors. Opponents say it will spoil a much-loved section of the shoreline, which has been enjoyed by families for generations. Standing next to the hill where the center will be built, Katrina Thornley said her group, Save Browning Mill Pond, is opposed to the new center because the state has the resources to put the offices somewhere else.

"They have plenty of other buildings they can use for that," she said.

Dave Thornley, who grew up near the 50-acre pond, said that while it has been closed to swimming for decades, it is still a popular picnic and fishing spot that will be ruined by the new center.

"As a child, I learned how to fish here, I learned how to swim here," he said. "The hill where they want to put this building, all the locals, when we have snow, they use it for sledding. They've already taken away the swimming. It's still a beautiful place to hike and mountain bike."

Between 14 to 20 full-time staff and several seasonal employees will work in the new building. In addition to offices, the facility will house a laboratory where biologists will test samples for pathogens, a natural history display area, and a visitor center with rest rooms and conference space.

"We wanted a visitor center as well, so that the public that comes to Arcadia for those outdoor sports and the purposes of wildlife management, each one of these programs, they host private landowners and non-profits," Mouradjian said. "We have a network of partner organizations and services like woodlot management courses, things like that, and right now, we don't necessarily have a place to provide that public benefit."

Valerie Spicher, who has lived on the pond for more than 30 years, said she would rather see the department spend money maintaining the facilities it currently owns.

"It's a beautiful, beautiful area, and they've let it go downhill for years, and it's very sad," she said. "There's just no need for another building. There's buildings everywhere. Spend the money. Make it beautiful again so everybody has a nice place to be again."

Another opponent, Mary Beth McKenna, said the state should re-purpose an existing building for its natural resources administrators.

"In Rhode Island, we learn about reduce, reuse and recycle. If there were ever something to say here, it's reduce disturbing the land and creating more items there. Reuse what you have and recycle," she said.

Thornley's group has not been in contact with DEM officials, but members are currently circulating a petition which they will send to Gov. Gina Raimondo.

Mouradjian said that with funding in place and a contractor hired, construction will go forward, but he noted that the public will still be invited to comment on the project.

"Once we're prepared to break ground, obviously we would have a public opportunity for discourse and share our plans," he said. "We think it's going to be a tremendous addition, not only to our facilities that we manage statewide, whether it's parks, whether it's management area facilities, but also give our staff a professional place to engage the public and operate from."

More information on Save Browning Mill Pond can be found on the group's Facebook page: facebook.com/Save-Browning-Mill-Pond-1791348021082049/
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