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Woodbine site may become New Jersey's first public off-road riding park

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By MICHAEL MILLER Staff Writer

New Jersey is closer to fulfilling a 2010 promise to find suitable public riding space for dirt bikers and all-terrain vehicle enthusiasts.

Lawmakers that year increased fines for illegal riding from \$75 to \$100, and required a registration fee for dirt bikes and ATVs. But the law first required the state Department of Environmental Protection to identify at least one suitable riding location before imposing the new rules.

Last month, the DEP bought the former Mount Pleasant Sand and Gravel pit off Route 610 in Woodbine for \$393,000. The 63-acre property was a former motocross track that was converted into a paintball course in 2007.

The state plans to solicit bids to lease the land to a private operator as New Jersey's first public riding park.

"This is an ongoing effort by the DEP to identify appropriate places for riders that will protect the environment as well," spokesman Larry Hajna said.

Maurice River Township, too, is inviting the DEP to look at its woods and marshes for a possible riding park, Mayor Kathy Ireland said.

The township is collaborating with the state Pinelands Commission and the DEP's Green Acres Program to find a suitable place that might include a campground or other facilities to make the park a destination for out-of-state riders.

"It's in the works, but there's nothing definite. Hopefully, it would bring in a source of revenue and give local residents a safe place to ride," the mayor said. "We have enough area. It's about finding the right one that won't disturb wildlife. We have two or three areas identified as possibilities."

Neighbors in Dennis Township said a public park can't open soon enough.

Local riders continue to make life miserable for neighbors in the South Dennis section of the township, residents Gary Gibson and Walt Noll said.

The two men said their properties on Gravel Hole Road were vandalized when someone splashed orange road paint on their lawn decorations, trash cans, and mailboxes. They suspect they were targeted for reprisals because of their outspoken criticism of their neighbors' riding.

"I have nothing to prove it," Noll said. "I've been here 12 years, and this was the first time my house has been vandalized."

The two men recently met with the Woodbine station commander for the New Jersey State Police to talk about their complaints.

"Police said they would beef up enforcement, but they said the township needs to enact ordinances to help them do a more effective job," Noll said.

The Dennis Township Committee appointed a subcommittee last year to look at compromises that would keep the peace while providing freedom for local riders on private property. Noll said the committee has dragged its feet on pursuing changes such as stiffer public-nuisance ordinances.

"We're not anti-ATV. But a neighbor has to be reasonable when he decides to ride. You have babies who are trying to sleep and swimming pools that get soiled from all the dust," Noll said. "That's not being neighborly. But people don't care."

Off-road enthusiast Dale Freitas, of Burlington Township, said he is skeptical a riding park will ever pass muster with environmentalists. For years, he lobbied the state for public riding space as the head of the New Jersey Off-Highway Vehicle Association. But lately he said he has been discouraged by the lack of progress.

"I'm exhausted. I feel like I'm banging my head against a wall. I'm convinced the environmentalists aren't going to let anyone build a park," he said. "No matter what they do, it's just not going to happen."

Freitas said he suspects fewer people in New Jersey are buying and riding ATVs and dirt bikes because of the sagging economy. But once the economy picks up, more people will be looking for places to ride, he said.

"It's better to come up with a solution now before the activity picks up again," he said.

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