

# The Valley News

A twice-weekly journal for and about people in the Fulton, N.Y. area & Oswego County • (315) 598-6397 • editor@valleynewsonline.com

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## Great Bear area to be showcased in brochure

Andrew Henderson 01-17-2009



**Outdoor recreation site in Volney**

The Great Bear Recreation Area, pictured here, is a large natural habitat located along the Oswego River and Route 57 in the Town of Volney. The area, more than 425 acres, is the longest section of undeveloped or natural area along the Oswego River. The Friends of Great Bear was formed two years ago to pursue preservation of the natural setting of the area.

- Valley News photo by Andrew Henderson

by Andrew Henderson

The Friends of Great Bear will use a \$360 grant from Parks & Trails New York to print a brochure highlighting the various trails and other information regarding the large natural habitat located along the Oswego River and Route 57 in the Town of Volney.

Dick Drosse, a member of the Friends of Great Bear, said the Great Bear Springs Recreation Area

has become an increasingly popular destination for walkers, bikers, and cross-country skiers.

“We have an informational brochure and a trail map, and this grant will allow us to broaden the scope of that,” said Drosse. “We want to get it out to different locations, say libraries and public areas. We want to promote it and we’re looking for more volunteers to help develop the area and maintain it.”

Over 425 acres, the site is the longest section of undeveloped or natural area along the Oswego River. The Friends of Great Bear formed two years ago to pursue preservation of the natural setting.

“It’s a non-motorized recreational area,” said Drosse. “It’s great for dog walking, hiking, mountain biking—any type of actual outdoor activity. In the winter time, you have people cross-country skiing and snowshoeing.”

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Currently, there are six marked trails as well as several other trails that are not marked. The marked trails are the River's Landing Loop (2.3 miles), Wheel Wash Extension (2.0 miles), Whiskey Island Trail (1.2 miles), Pump House Loop (0.9 miles), Great Bear Springs Loop (0.6 miles), and Bench Cutoff (0.5 miles).

"There are over six miles of marked trails," said Drosse. "There are also other trails that we have not marked yet."

In 2007, the group built four bridges crossing small streams, then in 2008 added three more bridges and cut a new single-track trail to bypass an overused (by ATVs) muddy section of one of the trails.

Parks & Trails New York has awarded eight Capacity Building Grants to provide not-for-profit park and trail organizations. Parks & Trails New York is the only organization working statewide to protect New York's parks and help communities create new parks.

Founded in 1985, Parks & Trails New York has grown from a small group of park advocates to over 5,000 members and supporters from every region of the state.

The grant program provides grants of up to \$3,000 to strengthen not-for-profit organizations that are working to build and protect parks and trails in communities across the state.

Funds will be used to increase organizational visibility and generate community support, grow membership, and attract additional volunteers.

Parks & Trails New York received 76 applications from organizations located in 41 counties throughout the state.

"The response, we saw clearly, illustrates how much these groups need and value this support," said Parks & Trails New York Executive Director Robin Dropkin. "We are pleased that a generous private donor made it possible for us to offer this type of assistance, which no other grant program provides."

The Friends of Great Bear was the only central New York organization to receive a grant. "The grant is not a lot of money, but it is more than enough to get started," he said.

Most of the Great Bear Springs Recreation Area is owned by the City of Fulton and is the main source of water for city residents. The rest of the land is owned by the Town of Volney, the New York State Canal Corporation, and a private resident.

The natural setting provides for excellent artesian well water, which the city uses. At one point, Nestle contacted the city about bottling and selling water from the Great Bear area.

Some have said that there is possibly three or four different ecosystems in the nearly four-mile long stretch. "We want to maintain this as it is—a natural area," Drosse said. "We want to keep the trails up and promote the use of it."

Organization members noted that there are three problems currently facing the Great Bear area—the abuse of trails by four-wheeled vehicles;

residents bringing in their animals, such as dogs and horses; and continued erosion.

“We have several trails, but they do need maintenance and repairs,” said Drosse. “We had some trail damage by renegade ATVers who weren’t supposed to be there.”

### **The legend of the Great Bear**

According to Native American legend, a young brave—some say the father of Hiawatha—was attacked here by a large bear. The young brave fought off the bear.

Whether the brave was attacked while drinking from the springs or drank from the springs in thirst from his exhausting struggle, the brave named the springs “Mishemokwa,” meaning “Great Bear,” in honor of his victory. The springs have been called “Great Bear” ever since.

Other facts and history:

- The area known as Great Bear Springs is comprised of 236 acres owned by the City of Fulton and the 78-acre Town of Volney Park.
- Great Bear Springs has been a source of spring water for over 200 years and became the primary source of water for the City of Fulton in 1970.
- Beginning in 1885, several companies derived water from the Great Bear Springs for commercial purposes: Fulton Water Works Company (1885); Great Bear Spring Company (1888) bottled water from the Great Bear Springs for distribution throughout the northeast; and the Pure Water Supply Company (1890) distributed bottled water primarily in Syracuse.

Several ruins of former wells and pump houses have been located in the southeast quadrant. Although the water now comes from other sources, the Great Bear brand still exists today and is now owned by Nestle.

- The property also contains the historical Hinsmanville Lock and tow path that were a part of the original Oswego River Canal. The Hinsmanville Lock was one of 18 locks between the Erie Canal in Syracuse and Lake Ontario and was in use from 1828 until 1917 when the four-foot deep canal was refurbished and dredged to accommodate larger engine-powered barges. The deeper canal reduced the number of locks to nine and the Hinsmanville Lock was abandoned.
- Recreational use of Great Bear Springs can be traced back to the 1930s when the Civilian Conservation Corps planted the soft wood forest. Some bridges and infrastructure was built by the Boy Scouts and civil-service work crews in the early 1970s; however, it was not maintained and the ruins of some lean-tos are all that remains.

- *Valley News*

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