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## York's new Mt. Agamenticus lease includes bathroom, parking upgrades

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YORK, Maine — Representatives from the town and York Water District gathered Monday at the summit of Mt. Agamenticus to ceremonially lock in the terms of a new lease agreement at the site.

The amendment extends the term of the present lease through 2050, and it provides for two 20-year renewal terms. The goal is to guarantee long-term public access to the town-owned land atop the mountain while protecting the water district's interests regarding water quality.

In addition to the extension, the amendment allows for the widening of the access road, if needed, formalizes existing parking areas and provides for composting toilets and the bathroom buildings to house them to be built at the base and the summit.

The provisions aim to protect and enhance use of the trails and summit by residents and visitors, according to Parks and Recreation Director Robin Cogger, who formally presented the proposed lease amendment for approval by the town's selectmen last February. At that time, the board unanimously approved the proposed amendment.

Once the board approved, one more step remained before the amendment could be signed: approval by the voters. That came on July 14, when voters approved funding for construction of parking lots and public restroom facilities at both the base and summit of Mt. Agamenticus, authorizing up to \$1.2 million for the project.

Public use of this local treasure has been a concern since the Big A Ski area closed in 1974. In 1975, York turned down a private developer's proposed 3,500-unit housing development on and around Mt. Agamenticus and then voted to protect Mt. Agamenticus as a wilderness and recreation area.

Mike Estes, currently a selectman, spoke with pride about his father's role in protecting this natural resource.

“This is a great story,” said Estes, recalling how his father was on the Board of Selectmen when the current lease was signed, “and it was a great thing to preserve this use.”

In 1980, York voters approved the purchase of the summit of Mt. Agamenticus for public benefit, for \$200,000. That same year, because much of the surrounding land and the access road leading to the summit was owned by the York Water District, the town signed a 50-year lease with the Water District Trustees for the access road, along with 2.5 acres at the base of the mountain, for \$1.

Since that time, local residents and visitors have enjoyed what is described on The Nature Conservancy website as “an oasis of diversity in southern Maine,” noting that “the Mount Agamenticus region is home to the largest intact coastal forest between Acadia National Park and the New Jersey Pine Barrens.”

In 2018, with more than 10 years to go on the original lease, a group of interested parties began to discuss issues of mutual interest regarding use, access and facilities at the mountain's summit and base. This planning group included members of the York Water District Board of Trustees, the York Board of Selectmen and staff from the district and the Parks and Recreation Department.

These discussions focused on parking and restroom improvements at the base and the summit, to accommodate the explosion in use of this great natural resource.

Gary Stevens, assistance superintendent at the water district, started patrolling the road and trails in 1997.

“I’ve seen the use more than double,” said Stevens, who said there are days when there are so many cars parked at the base of the mountain on both sides of Mountain Road that it is difficult for traffic to get by and for visitors to safely approach the mountain.

“The volume of use is amazing,” echoed Town Manager Steve Burns, who was present for the ceremonial signing of the lease amendment on Monday, along with Stevens, members of the water district, Parks and Recreation staff and selectmen.

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Ultimately, Burns would like to see Mt. Agamenticus receive official designation as a park, as anticipated by a 1980 study prepared for the York Parks Commission to aid in park planning and implantation.

“This (amendment) is an important piece of the puzzle,” said Burns.

Commenting on the amendment when it was presented to the board last February, Burns said, “We’re basically looking at a lease that’s going to go through 2090 at no cost. I mean, what a deal!”

Vice-Chair Robert Palmer, Jr. echoed that, saying the amendment is “great for the citizens of York.”