

# Coming (hopefully): a nature retreat center

BY LINDA LEUZZI

[The Long Island Advance, March 17, 2016, p. 5](#)

Washington Lodge, the beloved, quirky building at 287 South Country Road in Brookhaven hamlet, has been donated to Brookhaven Town by the Post Morrow Foundation, Inc.

A resolution approved the transfer last week; the hope is that it becomes a Center for Environmental Education and Discovery, including a nature retreat center and hub for environmental classes and trail walks.

"The town will hold a public hearing for a license agreement with the Art and Nature Group," explained Brookhaven land management specialist John Turner. "There will be a staged plan for improvements so that the building can be utilized."

The Art and Nature Group is a nonprofit created by Eric Powers, who runs a for-profit group, Your Connection to Nature; Rebecca Muellers, president of the Art and Nature Group, is also affiliated with Primitive Pursuits, which partners with the Cornell Cooperative Extension. They had presented initially to the Post Morrow board.

"They did a nice presentation," said Post Morrow vice president Tom Williams. "I like them a lot and they have a lot of energy." Two renovation estimates had been taken by a contractor, Powers said. "On the low end, it was \$300,000," he said. "On the high end, it was \$450,000."

Post Morrow wanted the group to take over the house with cash in hand to fix it, he said. "We can't fundraise without a site," he said. "But I have feeling this is an easy fundraise." Powers alluded to possible celebrity interest; singer Paul Simon attended camp here, he said.

A wildlife biologist and a former park ranger at Barr Lake State Park in Colorado who does mobile wildlife education from Manhattan to Montauk, Powers said utilizing Washington Lodge had been a passion of his for three years

"It's still in fairly good shape, although the copper got stolen and also the roof needs fixing," he said.

Councilman Michael Loguercio, who introduced the resolution, said he was at the site recently and spoke with the Art and Nature Group. "It's a beautiful, picturesque spot and I'm thrilled we're able to preserve a piece of Long Island history and maintain a space for many people to enjoy," he said. A former Boy Scout, Loguercio said his family enjoys walking and hiking. "To be able to say I'm part



**Brookhaven Town land management specialist John Turner shakes hands with Post Morrow vice president Tom Williams in front of Washington Lodge. The house was donated to the town officially by Post Morrow last week. (Long Island Advance March 17, 2016, p. 5)**

of preserving this natural land, I'm delighted." Powers said the group would concentrate on a year of fundraising to complete Phase 1. "We'd fix up the first floor and one of the buildings for offices and classrooms," he said. "Phase 2 is to get the kitchen restored, for organic cooking classes and the site director's apartment. Phase 3 is to finish off the retreat center on second and third floor."

The lodge has 31 rooms total, he said, and is 7,000 square feet.

"We're hoping to be in next March," he said, adding that board member John Petsco, who heads up Long Island Creative Contracting, will act as contracting advisor.

Muellers said Center for Environmental Education and Discovery is the working name. "In terms of programming, we have a large group of environmental artists and educators looking to contribute," she said. "Classes could range from foraging for wild edibles, basic nature hiking, environmental journalism. We're probably talking from preschool to adults." Teens would be in the plan, possibly

creating environmental podcasts. Powers, who lives in East Setauket, said he wanted to link with NPR at Stony Brook for such work.

Muellers credited Powers with the vision. "He's run nature centers and was looking for a site as a nature center, but a unique one," she said. Having a nature retreat center for 20 people would make that mark, both said.

There are a lot of environmental educators and artists out there, she said, looking for a home base. Muellers took a master naturalist course with Powers when they first met.

"We were two go-getters who shared a common vision," she said. "I have a former career in marketing and public relations and brought it into a formal proposal. We started a nonprofit and created a board."

The building has been in a holding pattern since December 2010, when the Post Morrow Foundation acquired two acres of the property with Brookhaven Town. Suffolk County and the town took ownership of 7.6 acres and Post Morrow was responsible for maintaining the lodge. They purchased the building for \$262,000 in early 2011, said Williams.

The property and building was aimed for a potential nature site and center after the Marist Brothers of the Schools Inc. left and sold it.

But a right fit wasn't in the mix. And the vandalism incident in January that caused a school lockdown tipped Post-Morrow's hand. Williams said the building needs roof repair, a new cesspool system, foundation renovation and electrical upgrades. While it has a storied history, some reports have it built in 1845. It was named after George Constant Louis Washington, the reputed man who invented instant coffee. There were additions to the original structure over the years and other owners. The Marist Brothers purchased the lodge in 1961.

"The town would own the building and property," Turner confirmed. "The nonprofit would maintain it and fundraise for improvements."

Williams said Post Morrow will eventually develop and maintain a trail system, but the beauty of the agreement, echoed by Turner, is that it is part of a natural landscape trifecta. Although Isabella Rossellini's organic farm won't be involved, it is right next-door and the Dennis Puleston Preserve is located across the