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PHOTO ATTACHED

MONDAY, JULY 20, 2020



**Somerset County
Park Commission**

Post Office Box 5327
North Branch, NJ 08876

Mark Caliguire
President

D.J. Hunsinger
Vice President

Paul Drake

Helen "Chickie" Haines

Jim Leonard

Doug Ludwig

Kevin McCallen

Dorothy Paluck

Scott Ross

Geoffrey Soriano,
Secretary Director

Cynthia Sullivan,
Assistant Director

HEADQUARTERS

355 MILLTOWN ROAD
BRIDGEWATER, NJ 08807

TEL: 908.722.1200
FAX: 908.722.6592
NJ Relay 711

For the hearing/speech impaired

www.somersetcountyparks.org

SOMERSET COUNTY PARK COMMISSIONERS ISSUE "THE STATE OF LORD STIRLING STABLE"

BRIDGEWATER, NJ – In operation for more than five decades, Lord Stirling Stable, located in the Baking Ridge Section of Bernards Township, has offered a variety of riding activities for riders of most ages and skill levels. The Stable is one of the many jewels in the park system stewarded by the Somerset County Park Commission and funded in large measure by the Somerset County Board of Chosen Freeholders.

The Park Commission and the Freeholder Board have recently been made aware of and wish to dispel a myriad of rumors relating to Lord Stirling Stable. **First and foremost, a decision has never been made to close the Stable permanently.** As explained in more detail below, the programmatic components of the Stable were suspended in response to the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic. **In addition, there is neither a plan in place nor has any consideration been given to selling the Lord Stirling property to any third party—including, most notably, a developer.**

Finally, the Park Commission and Freeholders continue to work to achieve their mutual intention to reopen the Stable in some fashion that makes sound fiscal sense. It is unequivocally agreed that the presence of horses in the Stable's pastures is a securely knit fabric which has facilitated the establishment of Somerset County's exemplary quality of life.

The COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic and the resulting mandated restrictions to ensure the safety of both staff members and the public have had a very profound impact on the Somerset County Park Commission—the entirety of the Commission and not just the Lord Stirling Stable. Park Commissioners, senior management and staff have been forced to make some very difficult decisions over the last four months. Facilities were closed and programming was cancelled in order to either comply with Governor Murphy's many Executive Orders or endeavor to ensure the financial survival of the Park Commission for the balance of 2020. The hiring of seasonal and part-time employees has been necessarily constrained. The cessation or constriction of the Commission's business has had an extreme effect on the financial well-being of the Park Commission, and the loss of revenue experienced will, no doubt, result in long lasting aftereffects.

To help alleviate the financial burden that the Stable presented when the pandemic began, the number of lesson horses in the herd was reduced and staffing was cut to the minimum possible. Despite those measures and the day-to-day effort of the Stable's Management and staff to reduce costs, the expenses at the Stable continue to be substantial and the deficit continues to increase. The difficult decision to disperse the remainder of the lesson herd was made. Financially there was no other option.

The plan at Lord Stirling Stable as is the plan at many of the Commission's other facilities is to "hibernate" for the balance of 2020. Frankly, since the Stable consistently operates at a significant loss, the Commission cannot afford to do much else. The plan has never been to close the Stable permanently. Rather, there has been a suspension of programmatic activity. Currently, there are 30 horses boarded at Lord Stirling. And, as the Stable's loyal ridership knows well, many of those horses were previously a part of the Commission's lesson herd.



The majority of the property that is Lord Stirling Park (comprised of the Stable and the Commission's Environmental Education Center) was purchased by Somerset County in 1967 utilizing a combination of funds contributed by the New Jersey Green Acres Program, North Jersey Conservation Foundation (now known as New Jersey Conservation Foundation), and the Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Today, the entirety of 1,105 acres that comprise Lord Stirling Park are listed on Somerset County's Recreation and Open Space Inventory, and, as such, the property is encumbered by and subject to the N.J. Green Acres rules which are overseen and enforced by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection Green Acres Program. It is rare when a diversion of Green Acres-encumbered parkland occurs, and the process for doing so is exceptionally arduous. To be certain, however, there is no intention of applying for diversion approval.

Finally, since January of this year—before the pandemic hit in March—Park Commission staff and senior management, as well as Park Commissioners and County representatives, have met as a committee in order to explore alternatives to address the financial challenges that the Stable presents. **While one option could be to cease stable operations, the committee quickly and unanimously dismissed same and is now focused on a financially prudent plan of reopening Lord Stirling Stable.**

Much like the pandemic itself, the recent events at Lord Stirling Stable are indeed emotional since riders have attachments to the horses, and therefore can be difficult to understand and embrace. The Freeholder Board and Park Commission are working their very hardest to ensure that a herd of horses will continue to roam Lord Stirling's pastures and that the Stable's programmatic component will resume.

Information of Park Commission programs and activities may be found at www.somersetcountyparks.org or by calling 908-722-1200.

PHOTO CAPTION: Somerset County Park Commission Lord Stirling Stable.

PRESS CONTACT: Rich Reitman 908-526-1390
rreitman@thereitmangroup.com