

A Shift For Survival

The impact of the Girl Scout realignment on camps

By Gregory A. Copeland and Elizabeth W. Iszler

“A camp can be nicely planned within daily reach of many of our large cities, but should be far enough to escape city sounds and smells. It is not a camp, however, if it is where a stream of strangers can pass by at any time of the day or night within sight and hearing.”

--*How Girls Can Help Their Country: The 1913 Girl Scout Handbook*

Camping has been a core value of the Girl Scout Movement since Juliette Gordon Low gathered 18 girls in Savannah, Ga., to create the first troop on March 12, 1912. At the movement's apex after World War II, there was almost a religious zeal by the national organization to ensure that every Girl Scout Council would own a camp.



The fervor of the movement until the mid-1960s created hundreds of camps and scout houses throughout the country. Most of these sites remained part of the movement as the national organization led a series of council consolidations from over 1,300 councils to 370 by the mid-1970s. Additional mergers beginning in the 1990s consolidated the total number of councils to 330 by 2005.

For the past three years, the Girl Scouts of the USA has embarked on the most ambitious realignment of any youth service agency in history. By the end of 2009, there will be 109 councils serving every square mile of the country. A key tenet of the realignment is that property will not be dealt with until two years after the new council has been established. Therefore, the impact is just starting to reveal itself, as the councils formed in 2007 are beginning to assess their property situation.

A Bounty Of Land

Based on an internet search of the realigned councils and an inventory of the properties for those councils that have not realigned as of this date, 70 percent of the properties listed include land totaling over 103,000 acres. These statistics do not account for land owned by the council that is not available for program use. It is believed the number of properties will be significantly higher when these additional sites are accounted for.

Land is the greatest asset and greatest liability for all 109 councils. The Girl Scouts of Northern California inherited 35 sites, with 10 being major camp properties. The Girl Scouts Heart of Hudson Council has 19 properties, and the Girl Scouts of Eastern Pennsylvania has seven major camp properties representing over 2,500 acres of land.

Similar Resources

Most of the properties are similar from a development standpoint. This is not surprising since the vast majority were developed over the same time period, from 1950 through 1965. The national organization recruited a group of young women under the direction of Julian Salomon to travel the country and help councils find land and develop camps.

The design of the camps was heavily influenced by Salomon's book, *Camp Site Development*, which includes development criteria, living unit layouts and building examples. Most of the sites have a camper capacity of less than 150, with primitive or rustic camping units consisting of tents or seasonal cabins, a dining hall if it is a resident camp and a limited series of structured activity areas.

The vast majority of the accommodations at the sites are seasonal. Typically year-round opportunities are limited to a few troop houses or use of the dining hall for over-nights by troops.

Age, Condition And Design

Most of the Girl Scout Camps are over 50 years old. Although the majority of the legacy councils did a good job of maintaining their facilities, the reality is that several of the sites are at the point where replacement, redevelopment or government-mandated improvements have become a necessity. The new councils are faced with multiple properties, developed as seasonal rustic camps and all requiring the same level of maintenance, infrastructure upgrades and repairs. How many traditional (1950s-model) resident and troop camps can a council sustain?

Modern Challenges

The design of the older camps does not meet the demographics of the current Girl Scout membership. The original unit design called for living units with 32 girls and four leaders. The typical troop today is 10 to 14 people, including the leaders. This means that most camps are grossly underutilized from an occupancy standpoint. In a typical camp with a capacity of 150, at least eight troops should be supported. The traditional unit design cuts the number of troops in half. So in addition to the basic improvements needed, the new councils have to look for ways to increase occupancy and usage to justify the continued operation of the properties.

It is important to note that the legacy councils have been dealing with the same issues for years.

Many of the councils have focused on development of one or two camp sites within their asset portfolios. There are excellent examples of councils that over the last 20 years have divested property and created new outdoor program models for girls. These include Camp Timber Ridge and Camp Misty Mountain with the Girl Scouts of Northwest Georgia (now Girl Scouts Atlanta) and Tomahawk Ranch and Magic Sky Ranch with the Girl Scouts-Mile Hi Council (now Girl Scouts of Colorado). The Girl Scouts Gateway Council in Jacksonville, Fla., is beginning the first phase of development at North Fork Ranch, which will serve over 440 people in multiple centers for resident, troop and day camping as well as adult training.

The most important impact of realignment is that while there may be one or two excellent property assets, the new councils now have to deal with three to five times more property in various states of condition and repair. The process of asset analysis, evaluation and consolidation begins anew.

Regulatory Environment

Camps are not immune to the massive regulatory changes that have occurred over the last 20 years. They are increasingly impacted by ADA, wetlands regulation, water-quality standards, waste-water quality standards and the fire-suppression requirements within the International Building Code that has been adopted by a majority of the states. Regulatory approvals that used to take a few minutes and a handshake can now take years and cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. The issues now become the number of sites in jeopardy of closure and whether individual sites can afford to meet current requirements.

Construction Costs

The average construction cost for camp buildings ranges from \$150 to over \$200 per square foot. There is no longer a \$20,000 cabin. Infrastructure for a new camp is 5 million to 6 million dollars. The average cost for a new resident/troop camp is over \$76,000 per bed. A year-round troop house costs over \$20,000 per bed. A new dining hall costs over \$7,700 per chair.

Fire-suppression (sprinklers) for an existing building can range from \$10 to \$20 per square foot. The point is that a camp is a very expensive commercial facility. Multiply these costs by four to nine properties, and each council has a multi-million dollar management challenge.

The Future Is Today

The Girl Scouts has the opportunity to reestablish the organization as a national leader in the camping industry. It will require a bold national vision, development of sustainable operational models and creation of sound, measureable business practices for the outdoor program. We fully understand that long-time members of the Girl Scout movement will view the disposition of property as a tragedy.

The strong emotional ties to the loss of a place where life-long friendships were created have to be acknowledged and dealt with as part of the process. However, without substantial change, camping as a significant part of service to girls within a council is in jeopardy.

A council cannot afford to pay hundreds or thousands of dollars to subsidize 5 to 10 percent of the membership that participates in resident camping at the expense of the other 90 to 95 percent of the girls in the council. The most important question a new council must answer is:

- Are we committed to the outdoor program for girls?

If the answer is no, then the direction is clear. The process will be focused on the disposal of property assets. If the answer is yes, then the questions and process become much more dynamic. The next question should not be about property:

- What is the plan for the outdoor program, and what resources are required?

This approach frees the council to focus on the mission, the needs of girls and service to the membership first. Property becomes a tool for accomplishing the outdoor -program vision. This approach is not new; we have been guiding councils to approach planning in this manner for over 25 years. What are new are the tools and resources that councils are using to help generate the answers.

The new questions being presented to our firm by councils follow:

- What is the sustainable business model(s) for operation of the outdoor program?
- What is the actual market demand for the outdoor program?
- How much camper capacity is required and where to maximize Girl Scout dollars?
- What are the membership preferences in terms of property use, facilities and programs?
- What is the potential for third-party ventures or rentals of the property?
- What is the value of the natural resources on each property (water, timber, minerals)?
- What is the current monetary value of each property?
- What are the trends for future value of the property?

Answering these questions requires a team of specialists who can combine state-of-the-art analytic methods with extensive professional experience. It is critical that key members of the consulting team are well-versed in Girl Scout culture and programs to help the team translate its findings into meaningful solutions.

The disciplines associated with this effort include economists, geo-spatial and geo-statistical specialists, market researchers, real estate appraisers, lawyers, foresters, conservationists, planners, landscape architects, architects and civil engineers. It is an approach founded on sound business principles designed to create solutions based on fact rather than desire and hope.

There is no question that the next decade will be especially challenging for the Girl Scouts. The decisions ahead may be painful as each council must decide which properties to maintain and which will be disposed. The changes also will have a significant impact on membership and accredited camp sites. Currently, there are more than 231 Girl Scout camps listed on the Camp Resource Guide. This number may easily be cut in half over the next decade.

It is the hope that the individual councils and Girl Scouts of the USA will reestablish the organization as a leader in opening the world of nature to girls through the camp setting. There is a tremendous opportunity to establish a new paradigm to create a sustainable operational model for the outdoor program that will carry the Girl Scouts and the camping industry for the next 95 years.

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