

Sunrise Resort in Moodus To Close

By ALAINE GRIFFIN

Hartford Courant - August 26, 2008

EAST HADDAM — For 57 years, Sunrise Resort has been Tina Peckingham's summer retreat, a place where she, her children and grandchildren learned to swim, canoe and dance.

So when Peckingham heard that the 146-acre getaway in the town's woodsy Moodus section was closing, she was upset.

"It's like they knocked the wind out of me. It's the only resort of its kind in Connecticut," Peckingham, 62, of West Haven, said Monday.

This summer is the last for Sunrise Resort, the same kind of old-fashioned memory maker featured in the movie "Dirty Dancing." The regional landmark in the Connecticut River Valley will close after Labor Day, ending a 92-year run as a vacation destination and scenic spot for wedding receptions, company picnics, family reunions and outdoor festivals. The state is interested in buying the land along the Salmon River for use as a state campground.

On Monday, resort owner Jim Johnson said he was planning a "farewell fireworks" show for Sunday night to mark the closing.

Sunrise began as a 3-acre resort in 1916 and grew steadily in popularity in the 1920s, when owner Henry Engle partnered with Ted Hilton to expand the place to accommodate a steady list of summer guests with active outdoor itineraries. Johnson's great aunt, Dot Lindvall, who had worked at the resort since 1937, bought the place in 1965 with her new husband, Frank Davis, and ran it until 1986, when Johnson's family took ownership.

Campers and resort-goers alike visited Sunrise, where guests could choose to stay at campsites, cabins, cottages, cabanas or motel rooms. The same people returned each year for the resort's long list of outdoor activities and home-cooked meals.

But Johnson said his parents (his father, Bob, worked as a bellhop at Sunrise in the 1950s) are both age 71 and ready to retire. And Jim Johnson and his brother are looking to start new ventures.

"It's time to move on," Johnson said. "We have a lot of land and a lot of taxes that we have to pay. And the place is not in its heyday like it used to be."

In the 1940s, '50s and '60s, Moodus was home to as many as 40 resorts, but affordable airline travel led local families to more faraway destinations. "They invented something called the airplane," Johnson said. "Now, why did they have to do that?"

After the Labor Day closing, the resort will remain open for private parties and other already-scheduled functions until it is sold. Sunrise has employed about 10 workers year-round and 80 to 100 in the summer, Johnson said.

Dennis Schain, spokesman for the state Department of Environmental Protection, confirmed Monday that the state is looking at the resort, but said a deal has not been finalized.

"We are very interested in this property and we've been in discussion with the property owners and the town," Schain said. "We are now working on the structure of an agreement and working to secure funds for the purchase. If we are able to do this, we will finalize the agreement and schedule a closing."

When the family decided to sell the resort, Johnson said, they considered a plan to build 89 homes, but local officials were concerned about the impact of what would have been a large development in this town of 8,300. Also, Johnson said he "wasn't comfortable" with offers from people who wanted to continue running the resort.

"We could have made more money if the land was developed," Johnson said. "But we think this is the best plan for the town and the state." He declined to say how much the state would pay for the resort.

There are tentative plans to continue hosting the Great Connecticut Cajun/Zydeco Music & Arts Festival at Sunrise — and possibly the East Haddam fair. The Connecticut Jazz Festival is expected to move to Mountain Ridge in Wallingford.

With a large swimming pool, tennis courts, shuffleboard, volleyball and miniature golf, Sunrise would be unlike any other state park, James Ventres, East Haddam's land use administrator, said.

For the town's part, East Haddam would help the state tear down various buildings on the site in exchange for the town's use of the park for such events as the local fair and summer concert series.

Though the town would lose Sunrise as a taxpayer — Ventres estimated a loss of under \$100,000 in annual taxes — he said the new campground would generate income for local businesses from campers. He said state ownership would also help East Haddam maintain much-desired open space.

"This will give people access to a gorgeous stretch of the river," Ventres said.

But for Peckingham and others, a state park and campground won't be the same. Earlier this month, families she has known for decades through visits to the resort gathered on the last day of their vacations. They had heard the place was closing.

"A lot of them were crying," Peckingham said. This was, after all, the place where Hilton, the former owner, celebrated Christmas in July with holiday decorations, snow-making machines and silver dollars for children visiting from local orphanages.

"These are wonderful memories," Peckingham said. "You have no idea how sad this is. I'm almost saying novenas hoping this whole deal falls through."