

Center for Wildlife moving toward new dream home



Henry, a porcupine who helps with raising awareness in schools and communities for the Center for Wildlife, scopes out the new land the center bought from the water district. Photo by Deb Cram/Seacoastonline

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YORK — An ecstatic group of Center for Wildlife staff and board members spoke in glowing terms about their future, days after the center formally purchased more than eight acres of land that will allow them to create a first-class rehabilitation facility and education center.

“This day has been a long time coming,” said Dawn Dickenson, chair of the center’s board of directors. “This is the culmination of a dream.”

The center currently leases 14 acres from the York Water District, but wanted to own their property. An engineer hired by the center found that more than eight acres of adjoining land fell outside of the district’s watershed. The center and district entered into negotiations, culminating in the center’s July 25 purchase of the 8.42-acre parcel for \$97,000.

Now it’s time to plan to launch the next phase of the project – a capital campaign to raise funds for a state of the art center that will highlight its two missions: wildlife rehabilitation and education. Plans call for a sophisticated medical facility to include X-ray and surgical equipment. An education center will provide a space for school and community groups, as well as training space for rehabilitators.

One recent day, a group of board members and staff trooped through the center’s newly purchased land, champagne bottles in tow, stopping in a clearing to talk about what this

next step means to them. Toddling alongside was Henry the porcupine, brought to them as a scraggly, undernourished baby seven months ago, and who after constant attention is now ready to be released back into the wild.

The layout of the new facility assures that the most medically critical patients are treated and rehabilitated in an area separate from the general public – a needed environment for healing, said executive director Kristen Lamb.

“We get to start from the very beginning so the public areas are accessible but the clinic and healing areas are quiet and separated from the noise,” she said.

Board member Tom Boisvert said a berm planted with trees selectively cut from elsewhere on the property will “create a natural buffer.”

The education center will provide opportunities for children and families to interact with the outdoors and the wildlife that lives there, said Lamb. The property will be dotted with walking trails and plenty of resident animals and birds will be glad to visit with guests.

“I saw a recent statistic that kids today have 5-7 minutes of outside play a day. That’s all,” she said. “If we’re going to ask the next generation to hold our values, unless they understand our mission that’s not going to happen. If they see Henry’s face, it will spark an interest in wildlife for a lifetime.”

Sonja Ahlberg, the medical clinic coordinator, looks forward to the day when her patients can get the care they deserve in a medical facility built to accommodate them.

“From a medical standpoint, this will be so far beyond what the current facility allows us to do,” said Ahlberg. Currently, the animals have to be brought to a veterinary clinic for X-rays and other procedures, but after the facility is built it can all be done in-house, she said.

Wildlife specialist Erin Burns said the Center for Wildlife is already known far and wide for the work it does, but the new facility will provide space for staff to train others who want to enter the field.

“This is a scientific, professional field. The center will allow us not only to become leaders in the wildlife rehabilitation community, we will be able to train new professionals, which is very exciting. People will look to us, now,” she said.

“The staff already has been invited to speak at conferences. Now we can host conferences,” said Lamb.

Dickenson stressed that this entire “dream” would not have been possible without Lamb.

“For seven years, we talked about strategic planning, but when Kristen came in, we began to make strides. She’s the pillar that supports the board and staff.”

The board figures it will take two to three years to raise the \$2 to \$2.5 million needed to make their dream a reality. That includes not only monetary contributions but in-kind donations of items like lumber or landscaping services. The funds raised will include a small endowment for operating costs.

The board plans to solicit lead gifts in the next year or so, before launching a public campaign.

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