

FACE-LIFT WILL BENEFIT SPECIAL-NEEDS CHILDREN

# New life for camp in Winder

By Merritt Melancon

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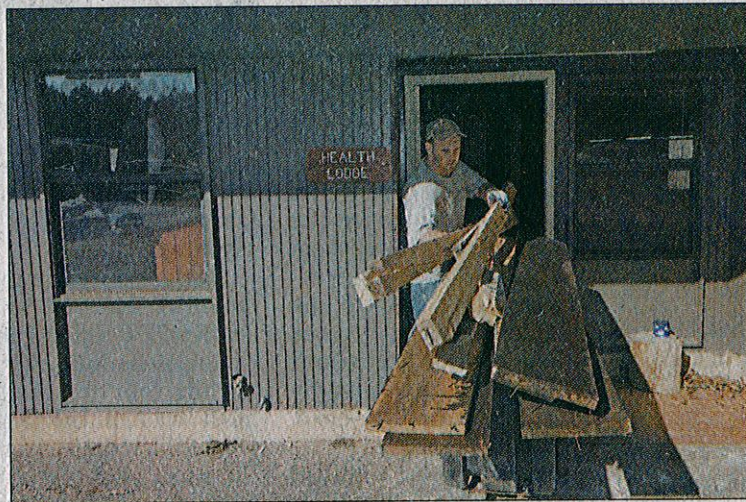
WINDER — It's been 38 years since the first excited youngsters arrived at Camp Will-a-Way in Fort Yargo State Park.

Thousands of happy campers have come to the camp's distinctive octagonal cabins and fiberglass teepee shelters since the summer of 1970 — but not lately.

Funding shortages and competition from other summer camps for special-needs children cut into attendance recently and the facilities began to fray a little around the edges.

All that should change come May, when Camp Twin Lakes — a nonprofit that already runs a summer camp for special-needs children in nearby Rutledge — opens the 2009 season at a refurbished Camp Will-a-Way in partnership with the state Department of Natural Resources.

The union of Twin Lakes and



Tricia Spaulding/Staff

Merit Construction employee JD Mills removes wood torn from the inside of lodges at Camp Will-a-Way. The camp, at Fort Yargo State Park in Winder, is being renovated and should be at full capacity by summer 2010.

DNR will pump more than \$1.5 million into the 250-bed camp over the next two years, providing a needed face-lift for cabins, activity areas and clinic.

"The work that they're putting into this place this year, we wouldn't be able to put into the

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densely in specific areas of the county.

After spending six months last year meeting with outside experts and planners and studying the ins and outs of TDRs, the Oconee committee unanimously agreed that a TDR program would be a "valuable tool (among many tools)" for the county.

The program "could help insure that Oconee County could continue to grow with well thought out development occurring in areas with adequate infrastructure and at the same time insuring the preservation of Oconee County's unique attributes, our historic landmarks, rural character and agricultural heritage, for generations to come," the committee said.

And, they said, "time is of the essence."

TDR programs are complicated and take a long time to draft, said committee member Russ Page.

"While there is not much development activity going on right now, there is less push to get (the program) completed now than in the middle of a development boom," Page said. "So it's not just that the lull is the best time to hire a consultant ... it's the best time to start and complete the process."

Once development picks back up, the county would be ready to deal with it, he said.

After hearing the committee's report, Oconee commissioners could schedule their recommendations for a vote, table the matter or ask for more information, said Wayne Provost,

## CAMP WILL BE ABLE TO HANDLE MORE KIDS AFTER UPGRADE from A1

camp over a five-year period," said Artie Doughty, a ranger at Fort Yargo State Park.

For Twin Lakes, expanding to a spruced-up site at Will-a-Way will allow the organization to provide a camp experience for about 1,000 more kids every year.

And for Winder residents, the partnership means that the summer camp that put Fort Yargo State Park on the map will once again be well-used and well-tended.

"It looks like it's going to be tremendous for both Camp Twin Lakes and the state," said Richard Cline, spokesman for the Friends of Fort Yargo State Park. "It will be great for them to have more space, and it will be great for the state to get (the camp) back up to being a top-notch facility."

When Will-a-Way opened in 1970, it was the first wheelchair-accessible and special-needs-oriented summer camp in the state — and one of the first of its kind in the nation, Cline said.

Besides having Americans with Disability Act-approved access to its cabins and other activity areas, Will-a-Way gave campers an opportunity to build connections with children who shared their life experiences.

"It was very special to the community," said Winder Mayor Chip Thompson. "And it served such a special group of children."

Children from across the



Tricia Spaulding/Staff

The facilities at Camp Will-a-Way in Winder's Fort Yargo State Park are under renovation.

Southeast came to Will-a-Way each summer to hang out with others who were experiencing similar health issues and the same thoughtless treatment by their peers — and who were all going to bear the same weird looks at school when they went back home.

"When Will-a-Way first opened, it was really like a flagship," Cline said.

Camp Twin Lakes opened in 1992, and it was nicer and a little more up-to-date than Will-a-Way. And over time, fewer summer camps were held in Winder.

Twin Lakes' staff partners with hospitals and advocacy groups like the American Lung Association, the Muscular Dystrophy Association or the Center for the Visually Impaired in Atlanta, according to Will-a-Way's new

director, Josh Sweat. The hospitals and advocacy groups supply volunteer counselors and medical staff, while Twin Lakes provides programming and meals.

"It's not only good to have people who are specialists in treating one particular group of kids, but it's also good for the doctors to see these kids outside of the hospital setting," Sweat said. "It's hard when you're in a hospital all the time to remember that you're treating kids and not just a disease."

There's little or no charge to 3,000 campers to attend Camp Twin Lakes, Sweat said, but participants are sometimes turned away for lack of space. Adding Will-a-Way to Twin Lakes' repertoire will allow the nonprofit to help about 1,000 new campers every year.

Renovation work started Monday. By Thursday, workers were demolishing the dated bathrooms in the cabins and ripping out the old air-conditioning units for replacement with more efficient units.

The new Camp Will-a-Way will host its first cohort of 75 campers in May, and will open for year-round operation after further renovations in the summer of 2010.



6 Daily Flights to T

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Later, he decided to keep open.

Arguing the Bowers said Georgia. M should have a certificate of approval from hospital officials. Lanier Park is a satellite in Blount County. He argued that the failed to announce impact the hospital bed shortage in the Barrow Region.

Barrow Region. The contractors long in the area do not have hospitals and the Eastern Hall County take paying from the Wire

"We will not," he said. The Northeast County for an appeal

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