

From the ashes of a destroyed 4-H camp rises a proposed Sandhills center to rival Lied Lodge

Feasibility study looks at proposed \$47 million facility for tourists, conferences and local gatherings in Halsey



A wildfire in October 2022 destroyed the Nebraska State 4-H Camp and burned 5,000 acres of the Nebraska National Forest near Halsey. Also destroyed was a historic lookout tower. (Courtesy of Nebraska Forest and Grasslands)

Paul Hammel
Senior Reporter
Nebraska Examiner

From the ashes of a destroyed 4-H camp at the Nebraska National Forest, an ambitious plan is rising for a \$47 million center for tourists, conferences and local and regional events.

A feasibility study is underway for the proposed “Sandhills Discovery Center” near Halsey after the Nebraska Legislature, earlier this year, allocated \$10 million towards replacing the State 4-H Camp, which was destroyed in a fire that swept through the forest 11 months ago.

State Sen. Mike Jacobson of North Platte, who represents the Halsey area and obtained the state funding, said that if the Sandhills center is done right, it could rival eastern Nebraska’s Mahoney State Park and Lied Lodge.

“All too often we don’t dream big enough,” Jacobson said in a press release.

He called the Nebraska National Forest and the Sandhills on which it sits “two of our state’s greatest treasures.”

The Nebraska Community Foundation, which helps dozens of Nebraska communities raise funds

for local projects, has already done an economic impact study that estimates such a facility would bring a \$4 million a year benefit to Halsey and nearby communities.

Now the foundation is conducting a feasibility study to gauge interest among donors for such a project, and what exactly should be built.

“We want to figure out how to do this right,” Jeff Yost, executive director of the Nebraska Community Foundation, said recently.

“This idea makes an enormous amount of sense to me,” he added, “because this is a unique part of the world, and people want experiences.”

On Wednesday, the Nebraska 4-H Foundation announced that its board, in a special meeting, had voted to commit a \$2 million insurance settlement from the fire toward development of the Discovery Center. The state’s funding must be matched dollar-for-dollar.

“We look forward to working with the community in a statewide effort to provide a future, first-class educational opportunity for 4-Her’s and an economic driver for the wider community,” said Roberta Pinkerton, president of the 4-H

Foundation.

The 4-H Camp, which had been a fixture at the Halsey forest for 65 years, hosted a variety of events, from family reunions and weddings to 4-H conferences and a “Becoming an Outdoors Woman” retreat.

Hard to imagine

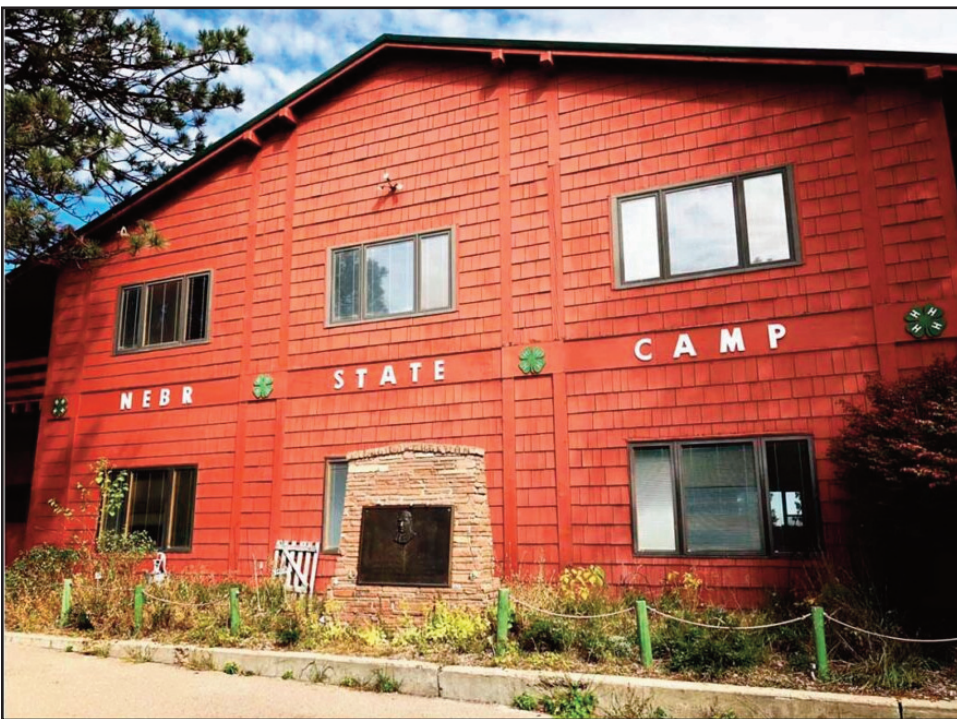
Dianna Rodocker, Halsey’s village clerk, said losing the camp was a blow to the community and the nearby ranching area because so many weddings and reunions were held there and because it generated traffic for local businesses.

She was among an estimated 60-70 people—equaling the population of Halsey—that packed a town hall meeting last month to hear about the plans from Jacobson and the Community Foundation.

“Everyone in town would be happy to see it,” Rodocker said. “But it’s hard to imagine that we’re going to have a facility out here that costs that much money that’s not in Omaha or Lincoln.”

But Yost and Stuart Shepherd, executive director of the Nebraska 4-H Foundation, said that such a facility in Halsey has a lot going for it.

The 4-H Camp, which could accommodate up to



The Eppley Lodge (above), as well as several cabins at the State 4-H Camp at the Nebraska National Forest in Halsey were destroyed in the fire. Only one of the 17 buildings at the camp survived. (Courtesy of Nebraska 4-H)

200 overnight visitors in its lodge and cabins, was almost always busy, Shepherd said.

On route to Black Hills, Yellowstone

Yost said people want to experience the Sandhills, a vast area of grass-covered sand dunes that became a National Natural Landmark in 1984. The same holds true for the 90,000-acre forest near

Halsey, the largest hand-planted forest in North America.

The Middle Loup River adjacent to the forest hosts canoe and float trips, he said, and visitors could access nearby agritourism attractions.

The center is being envisioned on private land, near the forest and possibly on Nebraska Highway 2, a route that leads to the

Black Hills and Yellowstone.

Yost said the facility, if deemed feasible, would be built in stages, with the first phase possibly opening by 2026. He said he’s been encouraged by the initial response.

“This is perfectly reasonable based on what tourists in 2023 are doing and say they want to do,” Yost said.

Cochran Honored For 20 Years Of Service

Clerk Magistrate Brenda Cochran was recognized for 20 years of service by Judge Joel Jay following court in Mullen at the Hooker County Courthouse on Tuesday, September 5.

Cochran is the Clerk Magistrate for the courts in Hooker, McPherson, Logan and Thomas counties. She received a framed certificate signed by Chief Justice Michael Heavican and State Court Administrator Corey Steel that reads, “The Nebraska Supreme Court wishes to recognize Brenda Cochran for skills, knowledge, and contributions to the administration of justice in the State of Nebraska through 20 years of dedicated service. Congratulations and thank you.”

Local State Fair 4-H Results

The Nebraska State Fair was held August 25 through September 4, 2023 at the State Fair Park in Grand Island. Record crowds enjoyed the annual fair, which celebrated it’s four millionth visitor, this year, since the fair was moved to Grand

Island.

Local 4-H’ers qualified for the state fair with their projects at their local county fair and many wonderful and creative exhibits were on display.

See State Fair
Page 10

