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HEADLINE: Girl Scout backers go political in bid for camp; Volunteers will meet, press legislators for Patapsco park parcel

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BODY:

They tried a spaghetti dinner. They tried a silent auction. They tried selling symbolic inches of camp land. But they just couldn't raise enough money.

And so tonight, a group of Girl Scout volunteers will go political, gathering to support a plan to convert part of the Patapsco Valley State Park in Howard County into a camp for Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, church groups and other youth groups.

"Sometimes in the accounting books [youth camps don't] add up to anything important," said Monica Suchoski, vice president of the Friends of Camp group that has tried to raise money for land. "I would just like to convince people that a lot of people in Howard County use" youth camp sites.

The Patapsco plan will be among 13 pieces of legislation under consideration by state lawmakers from this area -- everything from the camp to Sunday car sales to year-round schools.

Discussions start at 7:30 p.m. in the George Howard government building in Ellicott City.

The Girl Scout volunteers are upset over plans for the Girl Scouts of Central Maryland to sell about half of Camp Ilchester near Ellicott City to raise money for offices in downtown Baltimore.

The volunteers say the sale will ruin Camp Ilchester for overnight camping, leaving only a lodge and few wooded areas.

So with the help of state Sen. Martin G. Madden, they are looking for state land.

And Mr. Madden says the state Department of Natural Resources has just the spot -- a piece of land along the south banks of the Patapsco River about one mile southeast of historic Ellicott City.

Natural Resources had classified this land for youth camping in its 10-year master plan. But the department hasn't had the funds to repair damaged trails or pay for yearly operational costs, Mr. Madden said.

So Natural Resources is willing to give the land to Howard County on the condition that it be fixed up and that someone pay for yearly upkeep.

"It's a win, win, win for everyone," the senator said.

Not yet, though. It still is unclear who would pay for the repairs and yearly operational costs.

Mr. Madden's bill proposes that \$ 600,000 be set aside for getting a youth camp in shape. Half would come from Howard County and local youth groups, and the state would match that with \$ 300,000.

But Howard County Executive Charles I. Ecker said, "Our position is we're not going to spend any county money on it."

He said it might be possible to get the money from state "open space" funds distributed to counties. As of now, he is not taking a position either for or against the Patapsco camp.

Mr. Madden expects such organizations as Girl Scouts and church youth groups -- which would chip in 2.5 percent of the cost of developing the Patapsco land -- to volunteer to clear trails and maintain the camp.

But at the Girl Scouts of Central Maryland office, Executive Director Lisa Lungaro Cid said she is out of the loop as far as the new proposal is concerned. "We have not been approached at all," she said yesterday. "We don't know about any expectations for us."

She also said she believes there are adequate overnight camping facilities for Howard Scouts. Ms. Cid said Camp Ilchester still has available acreage and that there are two other camps owned by the Girl Scouts of Central Maryland, in Anne Arundel and Cecil counties.

In Howard, Ms. Suchoski said her group may be more enthusiastic than the central office because it better understands the camping desires in Howard.

She said groups here would be willing to help maintain the Patapsco site.

"Girl Scouts always have service projects," she said.

Efforts to reach Boy Scouts and 4-H club administrators were not successful yesterday.

Mr. Madden wrote his bill after the Friends of Camp group failed to raise enough money to keep Camp Ilchester's 38.4 acres intact.

The Girl Scout group's central office is nearing a deal with a developer on the sale of 18.8 acres. The central office will use the money from the sale for new corporate offices and a volunteer training center in Baltimore.

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