

# *Desert of Maine*

*where art and nature come to play*



# *Reimagining a Classic Freeport Destination*

# Vision for the Future

The Desert of Maine has been an iconic Freeport landmark for over 100 years. While in recent years it has fallen into disrepair, the potential for this extraordinary place is far beyond what it has recently become. As we have learned more about the unique history of the Desert of Maine, its geological past, and the fragile native ecosystems that are thriving on the edges of the sand, we foresee a vibrant gathering place for educators, students, nature lovers, and families—including tourists and locals alike. We also wish to continue the tradition of providing fun, family-friendly activities but in such a way that

lines up thematically to what makes this place truly special. At the center of our vision is the restoration of the historic Tuttle Barn, which has acoustics to match the grandeur and artistry of its 18th century beams, and which will serve as an intimate venue for music and other events.

Inspired by the Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens and arts venues such as Yellow Barn and Stone Mountain Arts Center, we envision creating world class infrastructure, education, and arts programming that will draw visitors from far and wide.

## Specifically, our plans for future investments include:

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- A fully restored, winterized barn to serve as an event and performance venue
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- Self-guided and guided tours for daily visitors with museum-quality signage and expert docents
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- Ecology, geology and history-focused educational programs for children and adults
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- Collaborative programs with local arts and nature organizations
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- A one-of-a-kind outdoor recreation area for children
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- Fun, family-friendly activities
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- A fully modernized campground with eco-friendly, elegant turnkey shelters for campers
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*With this enhanced infrastructure and programming, the Desert of Maine will add to Freeport's rich cultural fabric as a destination and an enticing place to call home.*

## Education

We are developing immersive, integrated, and collaborative learning experiences that promote curiosity and inquiry-based study in the areas of geology, ecology, and history. We are especially interested in helping children find their innate connection with nature. In the words of Richard Louv, “passion is lifted from the earth itself by the muddy hands of the young; it travels along grass-stained sleeves to the heart. If we are going to save environmentalism and the environment, we must also save an endangered indicator species: the child in nature.”

## Geology

What we know about the Desert of Maine is overshadowed by what we have yet to learn. We are working with geologist, Josh Smith PhD, who specializes in the glacial era when the dunes were first formed and Professor Emeritus, Roger Hooke PhD, whose area of expertise will help us understand the ongoing changes to the desert landscape. These findings will provide the basis for our geology programming.

## Ecology

The landscape that encompasses the dunes, the surrounding forest, and boggy areas adjacent to the dunes may be known for the ecological devastation that occurred when the topsoil eroded in the 1800's, but that is not the full story. The Desert is also a place that demonstrates remarkable resilience, especially on the edges where native ecosystems have popped up and a variety of wildlife species have found a home. Well-known ecologist Tom Wessels and Staff Ecologist at the Desert of Maine, Deborah Perkins, have noted that the Desert of Maine is an ideal place to study ecological succession and reforestation. Far from being a wasteland, the Desert of Maine is a living testament to the ability of nature to heal and thrive once again.

## History

The history of the Desert of Maine spans millennia and includes the Maine Wabanaki people, the Tuttle farm family of the 19th century, and the early 20th century entrepreneurs of Freeport's tourist industry. These stories of struggle, resourcefulness, and resilience are quintessential Maine stories. They are the kind of stories that help us understand why people made the difficult decisions that created the world we live in today. They are also the stories that will clarify the choices that help define our future.

## Arts Programming

Art and education are the common threads that unite all of our hopes and ambitions for the Desert of Maine. We are, at our core, an arts and education-based organization. We plan to provide rich arts programming, and we hope to become a place of opportunity for local musicians, singers, visual artists, and sculptors to share their work and inspire our visitors.

## Music

Maine is rich in talented musicians, and we hope to connect them with broader audiences through a year-round classical and folk concert series. Working collaboratively with other local arts organizations, we will embrace a spirit of community-centeredness, accessibility, and artistic rigor. To complement the performance series, we also hope to host visiting musicians-in-residence who would benefit creatively from the experience of setting aside time for their art and who would teach local youth and adults as part of their residency.

## Visual Arts and Crafts

In addition to music at the Desert of Maine, we have designated part of our visitors center as a gallery and retail space for local visual artists, and makers of fine arts and crafts. We believe that our local artists would benefit from a high profile location to exhibit and sell their work. Visual artists will also have the opportunity to participate in our teaching artist-in-residency programs.

## Sculpture

The rolling sand dunes are a perfect backdrop for local sculptors to showcase their work. We envision beautiful sculptures at various locations throughout the self-guided tour to bring another dimension to the rich history and science elements already present.

*Our end goal is to create an arts center that will simultaneously serve visitors, artists, and residents of Freeport and one that will work collaboratively with other local arts organizations.*

# Continuing the Tradition of Fun, Family Friendly Activities

## Barn Restoration

New England barns have long been gathering places where local culture has flourished, and we hope to continue the tradition by restoring the Tuttle Barn. This historic structure from the 1700s is framed using old English craft methods and constructed from the trees of Maine's old forests. It is a breathtaking historical structure that must be preserved.

The barn will be restored by Preservation Timber Framing under the expert direction of Arron Sturgis, President of Maine Preservation. Last fall, Arron's team performed a detailed assessment of the Tuttle Barn that was informed by years of experience and in-depth knowledge of historic New England architecture techniques. This assessment will form the basis for a historically authentic and beautiful restoration of the structure. Arron and his team will collaborate with architects and engineers that specialize in historical preservation to ensure the barn meets the highest standards of safety and architectural integrity.

We envision a stage backdropped by a wall of windows and stained glass overlooking the dunes. The will be a balcony which will serve as a meeting place for educational classes and local organizations. The end result will be a safe, accessible, functional, and magnificent structure that will draw visitors to Freeport.



## Outdoor Recreation Area for Children

While the Desert of Maine has been drawing thousands of visitors from all over the world for decades, few people from Freeport have had a good reason to go in recent years. We intend to change that. Starting in 2019, we commissioned local artist Steven Smith of Renaissance Timber to design and construct a natural materials playground with a slide, climbing wall, log jumble, see saw, balance beams, cargo net, lookout tower, swings, and a wooden moose climbing sculpture as the centerpiece. The playground area is situated next to where a shaded stone patio will be installed with ample seating for adults to relax as their children play. To realize our vision for the Desert of Maine to be a community gathering place, we have decided to make admission to the playground area and the desert (the world's largest sandbox!) free for residents of Freeport. We are in the planning stages of creating a number of fun, family friendly activities at the Desert to draw visitors and achieve sustainability.



## The Desert of Maine Campground

Freeport residents are often unaware that the Desert of Maine also has a campground. In recent years the campground has fallen into disrepair, but in 2019 we began a multi-year renovation effort. The bath house was gutted and re-clad in cedar with modern fixtures. It is now a stunning bath house and virtually every camper comments on how beautiful it is. We reduced the number of campsites from 46 to approximately 28 to give campers more space, and we undertook the daunting task of cleaning up decades of trash and fallen trees from the surrounding woods. We are working with Central Maine Power to bury the electric wires that are currently attached to the trees to improve safety and aesthetics.

Most importantly, we are seeking to update the town campground ordinance to keep pace with industry trends, allowing us to build attractive, turn-key shelters in place of Recreational Vehicle (RV) sites. The shelters we have designed with the help of engineers and architects from Harriman are accessible and appealing to guests.



## Addendum

### Our team of Historians, Scientists, and Craftsman



With the help of **Holly Hurd** who has been a local historical researcher for over a decade, we have discovered much about the lives of the Tuttle family that farmed on the Desert of Maine land, beginning in 1821. We are still in the process of understanding how they farmed and what led to the erosion of their lands. We are also investigating the fascinating details of the lived experiences of the Tuttle family.



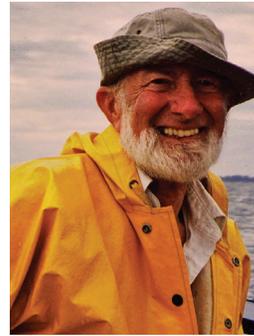
In the summer of 2019, we invited esteemed ecologist, **Tom Wessels**, to do a study of the ecology of the Desert of Maine. Mr. Wessels located several areas that he described as utterly unique and critical to protect. He was especially interested in the spots around the dunes in which co-evolving native species created resilient ecosystems. Tom's findings will be at the center of our educational programs for children, as they reinforce the importance of working with nature and caring for the environment.



Over the past year, we have worked with geologist **Josh Smith** to refine our understanding of when and how the dunes were formed. The various parts of the dunes tell a story how Maine was transformed by the last ice age.



**Deborah Perkins**, Staff Ecologist at the Desert of Maine, is a wildlife ecologist with over 25 years of experience in her field. Before settling down in her native Maine, she was a field biologist for many years, conducting fieldwork and research on bears, birds, and more—from the remote Arctic to the deserts of New Mexico. Deb has extensive experience in science education and working with youth, and is eager to inspire tomorrow's scientists and problem solvers while exploring the unique ecology at the Desert of Maine.



**Roger Hooke**, Professor Emeritus at University of Maine, is helping us understand the more recent changes to the dunes.



**Arron Sturgis**, owner of Preservation Timberframing and President of Maine Preservation, has been instrumental in reconstructing the history of the Tuttle Barn, parts of which date from the late 1700s. Arron's team is planning a full restoration of the barn so it can be preserved for future generations.



**Mike Hughes** of Hughes Inc. Arbor and Land Management is building a plan to ensure the long-term health and safety of the many trees on the Desert of Maine property.



**Chris Toriello** of Toriello Construction is the general contractor and visionary behind the structural upgrades of the grounds and buildings at the Desert of Maine. Chris previously served as Executive Director of the Travis Mills Foundation where she led a multi-year renovation of the Elizabeth Arden Estate



**Stephen Smith** of Renaissance Timber in Freeport, built the one-of-a-kind natural playground and continues to be involved in bringing his authentic style of craftsmanship to man projects at the Desert.

## Renovations Completed in 2019

*During 2019 and 2020, we completed over \$400,000 in capital improvements to the Desert of Maine. Here is a partial list of the renovations completed:*

### Safety Improvements

- Demolished maintenance building which had partially collapsed
- Demolished arts & crafts building which was rotting and unsafe
- Removed over two dozen standing dead trees
- Pruned dead limbs from trees in the campground and playground area to improve safety
- Removed damaged above-ground swimming pool
- Fixed numerous electrical safety issues



- Replaced failed plumbing and septic systems
- Removed Visitors Center annex which was partially collapsed
- Shored up parts of the barn where water damage threatened the structural integrity of the roof –full restoration needed as soon as possible
- Cleaned well for the first time in over a decade and upgraded pump
- Replaced aging vehicles
- Replaced railings, ramps, and stairs



**Interpretive Signs**

**Grounds**

- Removed fences which blocked the view of the desert from the parking lot
- Removed ten 40-yd dumpsters of trash
- Installed new natural playground
- Removed and composted 25+ dump trailers of fallen trees
- Installed dozens of museum-quality interpretive signs



**Morty the Moose**

## Campground

- Completely renovated the bath house
- Reduced number of sites from 46 to 28 to give each campsite more space
- Demolished pump house building and replaced with a new one
- Increased water pressure available to campsites by a factor of 10



*Renovated Bath House*

## Visitors Center

- Converted upstairs storage area to a beautiful art gallery
- Replaced lighting, doors, flooring, cladding, and more
- Built café area
- Installed two modern, handicap accessible bathrooms with a new septic system
- Installed new metal roof
- Painted exterior and interior
- Restored and refinished 100-year-old wooden floor to reveal old growth fir boards



## Planned Renovations for late 2020 and 2021

*Pending zoning changes, we are planning to invest over \$2,000,000 in capital improvements for 2020 and 2021*



### Grounds

- Complete renovation of the parking lot to improve lighting, drainage, traffic flow, and handicap accessibility
- Re-routing of the campground route to create an overflow parking area
- Trail work to improve the accessibility and safety of trails including a series of bridges over the stream behind the dunes
- Landscaping throughout featuring native species
- Partially excavate buried springhouse and build a glass wall so visitors can see the layers of the dunes
- Widen and smooth the loop trail for improved safety
- Sculptures throughout the landscape
- Add a number of educational and family-friendly activities such as a fossil hunt and “Gemstone Village”

### Visitors Center

- Wooden ramp and boardwalk from the Visitors Center to the dunes to improve accessibility for visitors with limited mobility
- Solar panels to offset annual energy usage for the campus
- Stone patio and trellis behind near the playground where visitors can eat/drink outside

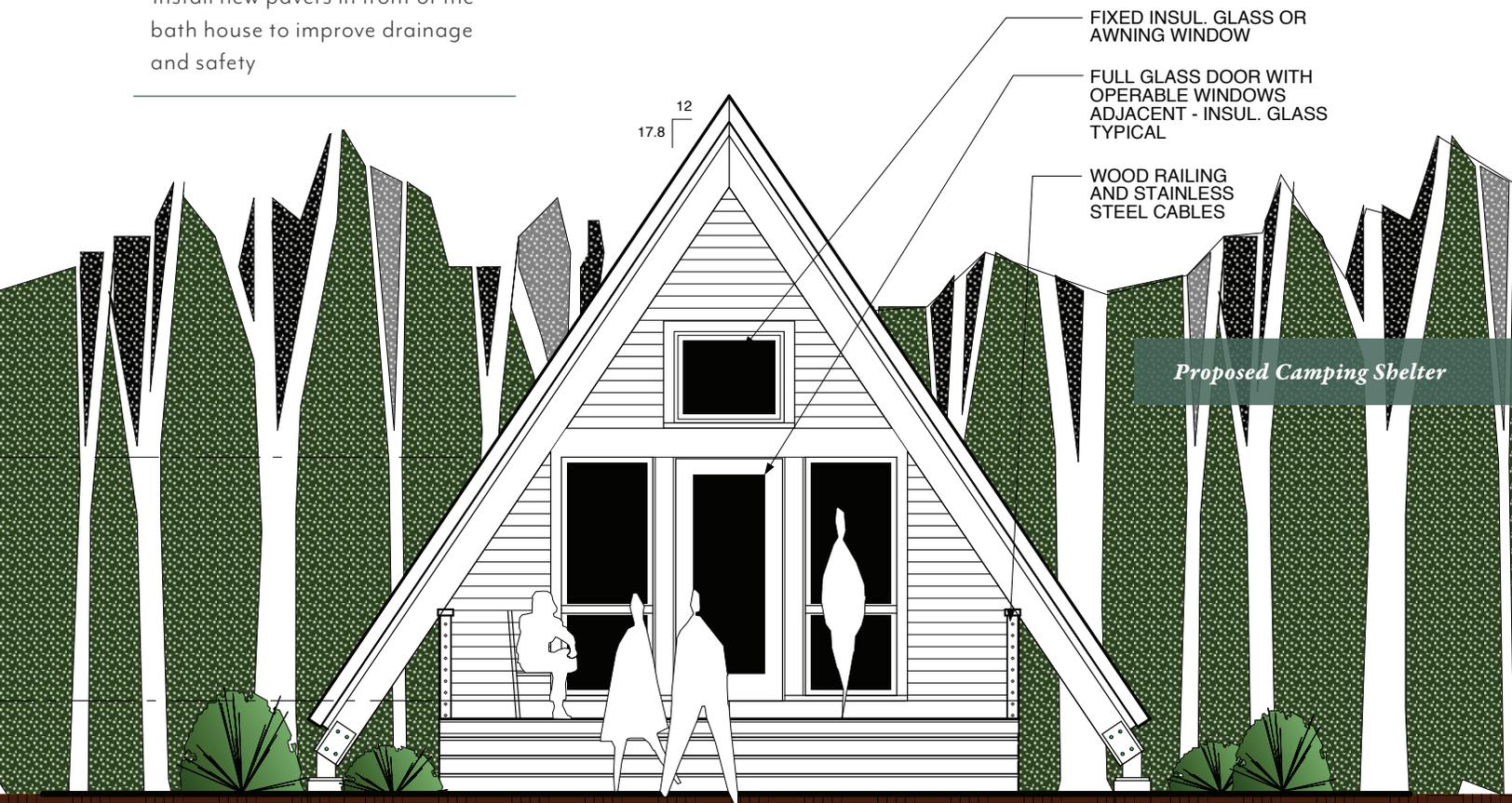


## Barn

- Complete restoration by a team including a master timber framer, builders, barn preservation experts, architects, and engineers. Barn will have a stage, balcony, insulation for year-round use, and a basement to store all of the necessary infrastructure such as fire suppression tanks, bathrooms, etc.

## Campground

- Bury and upgrade electrical lines which are currently strung along the trees to improve safety
- Build A-Frame shelters to give visitors a turnkey, "comfort camping" option
- Add water and electrical service to several sites
- Create a grassy area in front of the bath house for recreational use
- Install new pavers in front of the bath house to improve drainage and safety



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