



Historic Lonz Mansion looks toward leisure, education along Lake Erie's shoreline

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MIDDLE BASS ISLAND, Ohio — Imagine sleeping a few nights in an upstairs bedroom of the historic Lonz Mansion, right at the edge of the world's 11th largest body of freshwater.

That could happen as early as three years from now on Middle Bass Island.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources aims to finish restoring Lonz Mansion sometime in 2026 with \$5 million it has received from the Ohio General Assembly for the work, thereby offering another way for tourists to enjoy a glass of wine and be comforted by those soft, summer breezes coming off Lake Erie.

Mike Veres, Ohio DNR historical resources program manager, didn't go into much detail Saturday night while announcing plans to 140 people on the island. The event was a fund-raiser held by the Ohio State Parks Foundation to help bring in some private money for that and other improvements to the island and future improvements to other state parks.

But he said the goal is to turn the mansion's first floor into a state museum that will complement the museum that's already available to the public inside the refurbished Lonz Winery. The main difference will be that the mansion's first floor will be dedicated to the history of the Lonz family itself, not so much its business.

The upper floor will have four or five bedrooms rented out, bed-and-breakfast style. He said he envisions it as an island getaway for wedding parties, too.

"What we're planning is a vast improvement over what we have," Mr. Veres said. "It's going to have a nice overall period theme."

During an interview following his presentation, he said some of the initial work on the mansion has already begun. It is currently blocked off by a chain-link fence, with No Trespassing signs posted around it.

The announcement drew applause from those who attended the fund-raiser. Cost was \$75 a person or \$125 for a pair of tickets. Lonz wine was, of course, served along with an ample selection of cheese, crackers, hors d'oeuvres, and other light food.

Two Bowling Green State University graduate students provided live music, Micah White on guitar and Pablo Gomez-Estevez on keyboards.

The Magic at Middle Bass fund-raiser was the first of its kind by the still relatively new Ohio State Parks Foundation, which raises private money to help improve state parks. It was created barely two years ago, on Earth Day 2021.

Co-organizer Marcia Sloan Latta, one of the foundation's trustees, said she hopes it was the first of many fund-raisers the foundation will have in the coming years. She envisions many of the future events to be in the Lake Erie region, including northwest Ohio.

"We're just getting started," she told The Blade.

She and others credited Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine for the idea of creating a foundation as a means of generating private money to augment park programs. Mrs. Latta said she and others also looked at the experiences of similar foundations in other states.

"Some of the state park foundations have been around 25 or 30 years," she said. "We're excited about what the future holds for us."

Middle Bass Island was chosen as the site of the group's first fund-raiser in part because of its rich history and environmental features. Parks "with history as well as natural beauty" are ones people seem to like the best, Mrs. Latta said.

That island has the potential to become "a wonderful education resource for families and also a great place for people looking for an overnight place to stay," she said.

Many attendees were dressed in Prohibition Era clothing or accessories, a nod to how the Lake Erie islands in general - including Middle Bass - factored into those times.

Middle Bass Island once had 85 percent of its cropland covered by vineyards.

The winery's main cellar was built in 1863 by German immigrant Andrew Wehrle. In 1872, the company known back then as the Golden Eagle winery was America's largest winery, with a capacity of 500,000 gallons.

George Lonz was the winery's best-known owner. According to an Ohio DNR fact sheet, he and his father, Peter Lonz, merged their own winemaking business in 1884 with the Golden Eagle Winery.

During Prohibition, the Lonz family business survived by selling bottles of grape juice with instructions for fermenting the juice at home. After Prohibition was repealed in 1933, George Lonz got busy rebuilding the winery complex, agency records show.

These days, people use Middle Bass and other Lake Erie islands to party, relax, take a hike, go bicycling, go birding, or to catch a whiff of the outdoors.

"During the pandemic, all of us realized how important spending time in nature is," Mrs. Latta said.

She was joined on the trip by her husband, U.S. Rep. Bob Latta (R., Bowling Green), one of several public officials in attendance but not on the agenda as a speaker.

Mr. Latta said that restoring Middle Bass Island is integral to the state's tourism industry, which gets its biggest boost from Lake Erie.

"This is our largest tourism area in the state of Ohio," he said. "It brings people from all over."

The event drew several people from the Toledo area, including Jack Sculfort, of Perrysburg.

He said the history and beauty of the Lake Erie islands means a lot to him.

"I just love the fact that in the whole Great Lakes region there is no other place like this," he said.

Bob Mack, who's in his 22nd year as a Perrysburg Township trustee, said he has great affection for the islands in part because his great-grandfather helped make boats in the early 1900s.

"I think it's amazing what the state has done with this," he said of the Lonz property and Middle Bass Island in general. "There are a lot of things going on here. It's good to see it firsthand."

Christopher Hammond, of Findlay, said it's "exciting" to have a foundation drumming up support for state parks.

"To see more [fund-raisers] like this would be awesome," he said.

His wife, MaryBeth Hammond, agreed.

"It's an opportunity to support state parks long-term. It's really important to us," she said..

The state of Ohio purchased much of the island after the Lonz Winery's terrace collapsed on July 1, 2000. One person died and 75 people were injured in what became one of the largest and most complex rescue operations in Ohio history.

The Ohio DNR reopened the winery as a museum in 2017 on the grounds of what is now known as Middle Bass Island State Park. It put at least \$6 million into stabilizing that structure, which dates back to the 1860s.

The foundation's board includes former Gov. Bob Taft, whose administration directed the acquisition of Lonz Winery and 124 acres of Middle Bass Island.

Mr. Taft served as governor from 1999 to 2007. He was a founding member of the group. But he was not be at the event because of a prior commitment, David Henthorne, a trustee handling communications, said.

Another founding member was Ohio DNR Director Mary Mertz, who also wasn't there.

The Lonz Winery has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1986.

Middle Bass historian-author Mike Gora gave a few highlights of the island's past in a brief presentation.

Mr. Gora lives on Middle Bass about half of the year and in a small North Carolina village when he's not there.

He recalled how the Lonz Winery was once America's largest, and offers more information on his website.

"A lot of people come here because we have quieter docks than Put-in-Bay does," Mr. Gora said.

Full-time Middle Bass resident Jane Wolnik is a self-described “coffee snob” whose life changed with the opening of the state park there.

“I’m a coffee snob and there was no coffee here,” she explained to the fund-raiser audience, adding that she had never owned a business before and only started one because the park offered her an opportunity.

She opened an Island Grind coffee shop in the former winery’s press house. Near the end of 2022, she opened a second business, Prohibition, which serves 1920s-era cocktails. It’s affectionately known as the island’s speakeasy.

State Sen. Theresa Gavarone (R., Bowling Green) attended the event with her husband and said she was pleased by it.

“It’s wonderful to support our state parks. And what a beautiful venue,” she said. “It means so much to tourism. Events like this highlight what our state has to offer.”