

DCR chief tours visitor center, meets GALA reps

State officials 'see as much of an opportunity as a challenge' in plans

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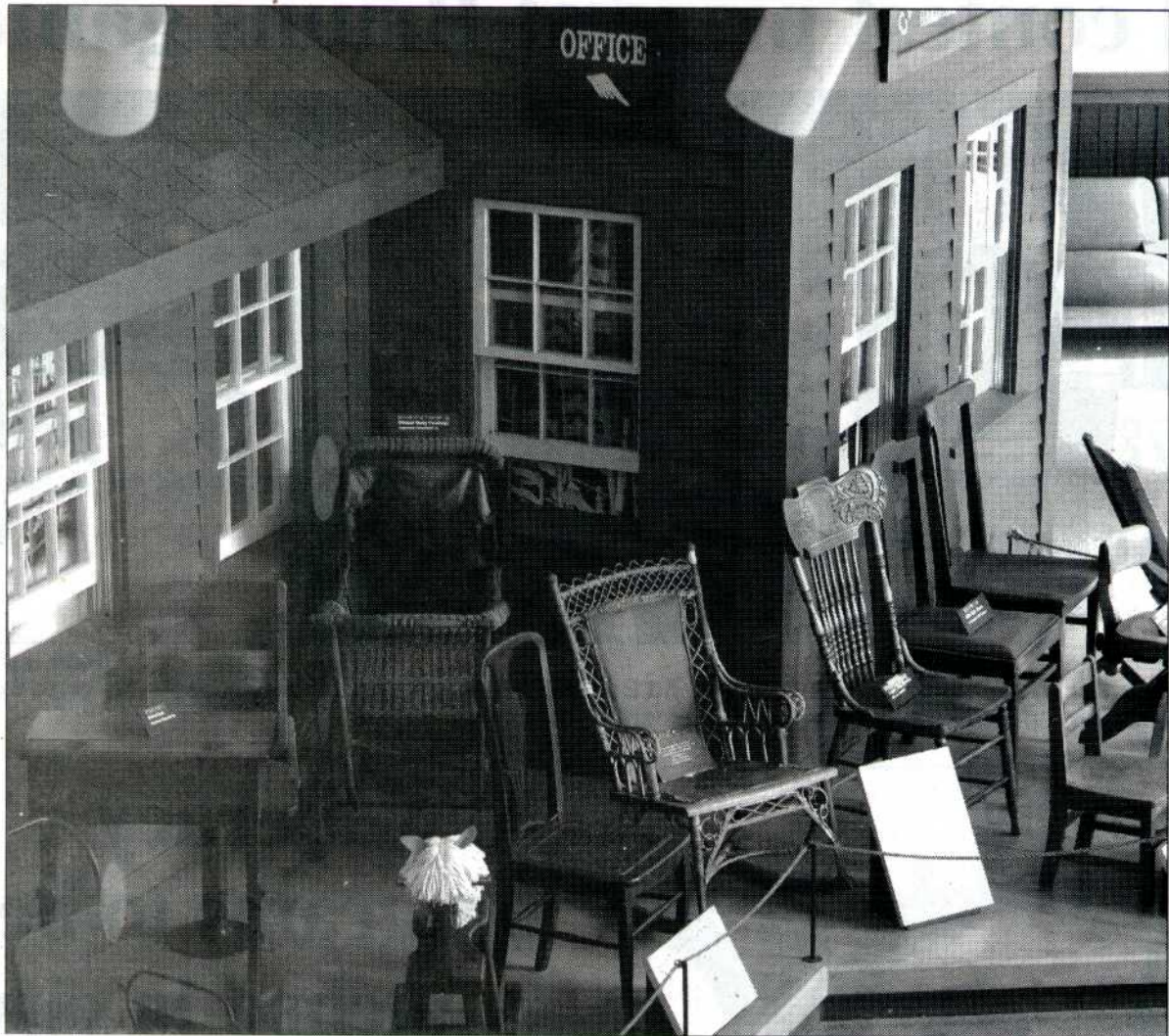
GARDNER — State Department of Conservation and Recreation Commissioner Edward Lambert toured the Heritage State Park Visitor Center and met with members of the Gardner Area League of Artists on Tuesday to discuss the possibility of the state and community group working in tandem to reopen the facility.

The building, a renovated fire station, has sat dormant and in need of repairs for nearly a decade. It currently requires an estimated \$45,000 investment in roof repairs and external lighting updates to bring it back to code.

Additionally, the building's cooling system is not functional, but officials say that would not prevent the building from passing inspections.

"The agency has been constrained fiscally for a multiple number of years. This is the longest stretch I can remember in terms of really significant restraint and budget cuts," Mr. Lambert said.

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News staff photo by MELISSA SANDFORD

One of the main exhibits in the Gardner Heritage State Park Visitor Center has remained untouched over the last decade since the building's closure.

DCR chief meets with GALA reps on visitor center plans

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Regarding a partnership with GALA to raise funds and find volunteers to staff the Central Street site, the commissioner said he sees "potential" in the proposed arrangement and "believes it is an avenue worth pursuing."

"We want to try to maintain our commitment to these facilities," he said. "As a former mayor myself, I know the need to not have vacant space in downtown well, and also how the arts can really go about bringing a place back to life."

In terms of next steps, Mr. Lambert has requested a detailed proposal from GALA. The commissioner urged members of the group to consider both short- and long-term approaches to raising capital. He also requested that members include ideas for integrating existing exhibits and artifacts into design plans to ensure that a primary portion of the facility remains true to its original purpose.

"We see as much of an opportunity as a challenge here. The good news is that this building is not as dilapidated as other facilities," he said. "We are looking at all of our heritage parks. The new generation has a different attention span. People

are looking for different kinds of exhibits compared to the past. They are looking for changing exhibits, not something that is static."

GALA members have discussed the possibility of repurposing a portion of the visitor center's available space for use as a gallery and shop, which would afford local artists an opportunity to share their work with the public on a rotating bases. According to GALA Chairman Kevin Bird, the location would also provide a home base for performances, readings, workshops, classes and demonstrations.

Mr. Bird said he believes area artists could assist the DCR in its mission of providing recreational, cultural, historical resources and activities to the public. Funding options currently being considered are grants, corporate sponsors and community fundraisers.

"If we get in and start small, we think support for the partnership will make itself very apparent," said Mr. Bird. "We will ideally phase into the building. We have a lot of different ideas for going after the necessary funding."

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