

# Cawthorne's Tenure as Chairman Longest in MISPC History

By Karen Gould

After more than 16 years of leading the Mackinac Island State Park Commission through challenges that sometimes were

politically charged and controversial, Dennis Cawthorne, the commission's longest serving chairman, handed over the chairmanship this summer to

his friend, law partner, and fellow commissioner, Frank Kelley.

His greatest achievement as chairman, he believes, has been to lead commission efforts to preserve property adjacent to the state park from private development, and to create a number of scenic easements to preserve the pristine views of the water. During his tenure as chairman, nearly a mile of shoreline has been protected from development, and the park has acquired land around Brown's Brook, sections of the Stonebrook area, and Sunset Rock.

State land now comprises about 83% of the island.

Of his 16 years at the helm, Mr. Cawthorne said, "It's been challenging, fun, and I hope I have been able to accomplish some genuine good for the Island, its people, and the entire state."

As a college student, he began working here for Mackinac Island Carriage Tours. In 1962, while on summer break from law school, he served as the executive director of the Mackinac Island Chamber of Commerce.

Now a Mackinac Island resident and businessman, Mr. Cawthorne said it never occurred to him to ask for a position on the commission after John Engler was elected governor in 1990, although he later became one of the governor's first appointments when he took office in January 1991.

"A couple of weeks after the election, I happened to be in his transition office. This was the period after he was elected, but before he was sworn in," remembers Mr. Cawthorne. "He entered the room, saw me, and announced to several people standing around, 'Well, there's our new Mackinac Island State Park commissioner.'"

One month later, Mr. Cawthorne was appointed to the post and a month after that, he was elected chairman.

"We had significant challenges early on," he said, "in my tenure as chairman."

Shortly after he became chairman, Mr. Cawthorne had a list of goals that included redesigning the lease structure for land the commission leases to cottage owners on the bluffs



**Frank Kelley (right) takes over chairmanship of Mackinac Island State Park Commission July 20, following his law partner Dennis Cawthorne's tenure. Mr. Cawthorne now serves as vice chair.**

and near the marina. In those areas, the land is owned by the state while the cottages are built and owned by the residents.

Such leases for land usually are granted for 20 years and had not been seriously adjusted since being lowered during the Depression.

Unfortunately, he said, before he had a chance to review them, a Detroit newspaper wrote a story about the rates. The article, "which claimed to be exposing the scandalously low lease rates," recalled Mr. Cawthorne, drew statewide attention.

While state residents thought the leaseholders were favored, the leaseholders thought the rate was fair.

"A lot of leaseholders were extremely unhappy," he said, "because they had become accustomed to paying as low as \$50 a year and were outraged that either I or the commission would even think about raising those rates."

Concerned about potential legislation mandating a very high rate structure, the commission took quick action. At Mr. Cawthorne's suggestion, a panel of citizens was established to hold public meetings and to research, discuss the rate structure, and make recommendations, which eventually were adopted by the commission.

"It was my belief we were doing the right thing, and in reality, doing the leaseholders a favor," he said, "even though it may not have been apparent to

them at the time that the move was saving them from higher, legislatively set rates."

A second major issue, a proposed expansion of the Island airport, created "a summer of great controversy," said Mr. Cawthorne. The idea to enlarge the Island's airstrip came from the State Aeronautics Commission chairperson, also a gubernatorial appointee, and it drew statewide attention.

"Both I and the entire commission were opposed to that from the very beginning," said Mr. Cawthorne.

Rather than make an enemy of the aeronautics board, which is responsible for airport funding, Mr. Cawthorne set about a more effective way to demonstrate that the commission and public were opposed to the expansion. He called for public hearings on the issue. Some people, he said, then assumed that because of the public hearings, the commission favored the airport expansion, but, "In reality, we never were in favor of it."

By summer's end, the proposed project was dropped after public sentiment strongly opposed the expansion plan.

"We were able, however, to turn the controversy to the Island's benefit," said Mr. Cawthorne, "because we then got Aeronautics to spend additional money on a whole host of Island airport safety and facility improvements."

Mr. Cawthorne remembers one public leader who frequently crusaded against the commissions Type 1 status in the Department of Natural Resources, which gave it independence in its operations. He said a former director of the Michigan United Conservation Clubs, the late Tom Washington, who also sat on the Natural Resources Commission and the Land Trust Fund board, tried to get the Type 1 status revoked.

This would not be Mr. Cawthorne's first clash with Mr. Washington.

"He didn't like Mackinac Island, or anything about it," said Mr. Cawthorne.

The alternative to Type 1 would mean the DNR would run the Mackinac State Historic Parks, and he said, "I can assure you that local input would be reduced to practically nothing."

In the early 1980s, the

## Meet Mackinac Island's Third Grade Class



**Third grade (Class of 2017): (front) Christopher Riggs; (middle row, from left) Talon Greenlee, Emily Modd Christian Styburski; (back) teacher Laura Eiseler.**



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