

ALERT

Catoctin Furnace advocates seek nearly 7,900-acre national historic district expansion

By Erik Anderson eanderson@newspost.com

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Catoctin Furnace Historical Society, Inc.
12610 Catoctin Furnace Road
Thurmont, Maryland 21788



Catoctin Furnace Historical Society, Inc.
240-283-7396
www.catoctinfurnace.org
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Submitted graphic

A map of the Catoctin Furnace area shows a nearly 7,900-acre proposed expansion of the Catoctin Furnace National Register Historic District outlined in red. The existing 120-acre district area is outlined in yellow. The expanded area would include most of the 12,000 acres of the original Catoctin Furnace ironworks industrial complex, which operated from 1776 to 1903.

Submitted graphic

The Catoctin Furnace Historical Society has started seeking support from area property owners for a planned years-long effort to expand the local National Register historic district by nearly 7,900 acres.

In a letter sent to all property owners within the proposed expansion area in mid January, the society wrote that the move would “reflect the greater furnacelands that were part of the historic 12,000+ acre industrial complex” that produced ironworks near Thurmont from 1776 to 1903. The current Catocin Furnace National Register Historic District covers nearly 120 acres.

The new total would be a little more than 8,000 acres.

Inclusion in the National Register district would make historic structures eligible for many state and federal tax credits, grants and loans aimed at structural preservation and rehabilitation, according to the letter.

The district also “confers a measure of protection from harm by Federal or State activities,” the letter states.

Amanda Whitmore, an historic preservation planner with Frederick County government, said in an interview that National Register protection could include the rerouting of proposed large utility projects that require state or federal permitting.

“For example, like a power line coming through, there might be enough historic resources that are impacted by a project that they might decide to just move it,” Whitmore said.

Elizabeth Comer, president of the Catocin Furnace Historical Society, said the National Register district does not come with any property restrictions for owners, with the exception of projects involving direct state or federal oversight.

Spreading that message, she said, is one of the major goals of the society’s property-owner outreach effort.

Understandably, she said, many people “confuse being part of the National Register historic district with a local district,” many of which place legal restrictions on changing historic properties.

She said the existing National Register district, which includes the village area immediately around the historic iron furnace ruin, was established in 1972, and that none of the private homeowners there have “been told they can’t demolish, change or alter in any way their property.”

Owners with the district, she said, have collectively received hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants for the rehabilitation of their historic homes.

Whitmore said that some local jurisdictions will place their own historic overlay districts on top of National Register districts, but Frederick County is not one of those jurisdictions.

She said Frederick County will not place a property in its own historic district “unless we have property-owner consent to do so.”

However, she said, about two years ago, the county enacted a demolition review process for all buildings over 50 years old, regardless of whether they’re in National Register districts.

If an owner intends to demolish a structure older than 50 years, she said, county planning staff review it for possible historical significance. If it might be significant, it’s sent to the county historic preservation commission for further review.

If it is found to have “unique historic value,” she said, county staff discuss options for saving the property with the owner. If the owner insists on demolition, she said, the county will document the building before demolition proceeds.

She said the county planning staff and County Council take National Register status into account when considering applications for property rezoning.

For example, she said if a developer requests that a property with an historic National Register farmhouse is rezoned for a residential subdivision, the county planning staff may recommend that the structure be preserved as part of the development. But those situations are treated on a case-by-case basis, she said.

Ultimately, she said, rezoning decisions are made by the council. They may choose to deny a property rezoning request due to National Register status, she said, but she’s unaware of any rezoning request being denied on those grounds.

“I think there’s more benefit from being in a National Register district than any negativity to it,” she said.

While the National Register of Historic Places is managed by the National Park Service, the application process will be run through the Maryland Historical Trust. Comer said the Catocin Furnace Historical Society plans to send a draft application to the state organization by April.

She said that if more than 50% of property owners in the proposed district expansion oppose the move, it won’t go forward. However, she said non-responses do not count as opposition for purposes of the process.

Comer said all property owners in the affected area are encouraged to fill out forms included with the outreach letters to let the historical society know their feelings on the proposed expansion.

“The expanded district would encompass these buildings and add 7,891.87 acres for a total of 9 sites, 93 contributing buildings, 118 non-contributing buildings, 12 contributing structures, 6 non-contributing structures, and 1 contributing object (a boundary marker),” according to the outreach letter.

Most of the new land in the district would be within the boundaries of the nearby national and state parks.

The historical society will hold a presentation on the proposed National Register expansion at the Thurmont Regional Library on Feb. 11 at 6:30 p.m. with a snow date on Feb. 28 at 6:30 p.m.

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