

# The old will be mixed with the new, when Gillette Castle opens in 2002

By JOHN CHRISTIE

Middletown Press Staff

EAST HADDAM — Even though Gillette Castle will not be open to the public until May of 2002, visitors can expect a whole new array of attractions.

Thursday night, about 25 residents living near the Gillette Castle State Park crammed into the Town Hall Annex to grill Department of Environmental Protection official on the castle's renovation and how it will affect the area.

"A number of residents have called me regarding Gillette Castle's renovations, asking questions about future tours and traffic," state Rep. Linda Orange, D-48, said. "They had so many questions I decide it would be best to hold a meeting with the DEP to find out what was going on."

For 18 months the famed actor's stone castle has been undergoing the first phase of a multi-million dollar renovation project by the DEP, funded by the Connecticut 2010 Plan to upgrade all State Parks and Forests.

Workers from Kronenberger & Sons Restoration, Inc. have been repairing the cas-

See CASTLE, Page A6



Irene Pastorellorhe Middletown Press

The Gillette Castle, shown in this aerial file photo, is currently closed for renovations.

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Comics	<b>D10,11</b>	Obituaries	<b>A2</b>
Community Notes	<b>B5</b>	Prime Times	<b>C6</b>
Crossword	<b>D10</b>	Religion	<b>B6</b>
Dear Abby	<b>D11</b>	Sports	<b>C1-5</b>
Editorials	<b>A5</b>	Television	<b>B6</b>
Local	<b>A3</b>	Weather	<b>B6</b>

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# FROM PAGE ONE

## State

### From Page A1

ments for Medicaid were not made until fiscal year 2001, thus they were not counted for fiscal year 2000.

Another reason for the discrepancy is that the GAAP sys-

tem does not credit surpluses from the previous year as incoming revenue thus the \$290 million in surplus from the prior year revenues was not accounted for in computing the deficit for fiscal year 2000.

Despite the fact that the State of Connecticut is continuing to use the modified cash system the towns are attempting to implement the GAAP sys-

tem.

One primary reason for this is bond rating. The GAAP system requires the towns to inventory all their capital assets, something they were not required to do in the past.

Middlefield Town Financial Manager Joe Geruch said the inventory will allow investors, potential bond purchasers, to see what kinds of infrastructure

problems the various towns are facing and gives the investor a better idea what that town will have to invest its money in the future. He said, "this is something investors have not had access to before."

Geruch also said the age and quality of a town's capital assets would play a role in setting interest rates for bonds, but that there are a number of

factors involved in setting bond rates.

Ultimately, though the municipalities are trying to avoid the situation the State Government is in where one system shows a healthy vibrant economy, but the standard used by businesses shows something else.

John Clark, director of budget and financial analysis for the Comptroller's office, said, "The

state is not in as good a financial shape as people think." However, he said the state was in solid financial shape thanks to the last five years in which there were high surpluses using either system.

Middlefield and other towns its size are due to make a switch to the GAAP system by 2004. Larger cities are due to make the switch by 2002.

## Castle

### From Page A1

tie's leaky roof — a structural problem since it was built 80 years ago, causing extensive damage to walls and ceilings.

Also, workers have been repairing the old stone walls winding along the park's paths. The walls have suffered from neglect and the elements.

"We were afraid the walls would burst out and collapse on the road in the way of a vehicle or walker," said Pamela Adams, state parks director for the DEP. "Both the roof and walls are nearly completed."

In March, workers will begin the second phase of renovation, a \$3.1 million project to repair the castle's interior, including fixing walls, ceilings and fixtures, removing asbestos from two rooms, replacing the electrical and heating systems and bringing the whole castle up to building safety codes.

The renovation to the castle is only a fraction of the changes the DEP will make to the state park.

"Twelve year ago, [the DEP] came to a consensus that we wanted to bring the castle back to being a home again, and to meet that goal meant that we had to move the park's administration and storage out [of the castle's basement]," Adams said.

To meet this goal, the DEP will construct a new visitors' center to hold the park's administrative section, ticket sales, a small gift shop, new rest rooms, and historical exhibits.

"We've designed the visitors' center to be reminiscent of what is inside the castle," said Linda Levine, program specialist for the DEP. "It will give visitors a chance to get an education about the castle's history before they go on a tour."

Also, visitors can expect the return of the steam and electric trains William Gillette ran over the estate's extensive trail system.

The trains were purchased by Lake Compounds Theme Park of Bristol, but recently gave them back to the DEP for free, and they will be repaired and restored by volunteer groups, Adams said.

"We plan to put them on exhibit as a static display ... and

possibly lay a small loop of track for the trains to ride around during special occasions in the summer time," Adams said.

Will all the construction going on, the whole park, which is open year-round, will have to be closed to the public starting May 1, she said. The park and castle should be open again on Memorial Day of 2002.

"The whole project should cost about \$10 million. It's money well spent," Adams said.

William Gillette (1853-1937) was one of the great figures of the American stage. Famous for his stage portrayal of the British

sleuth, Sherlock Holmes, Gillette is better known in Connecticut for his eclectic castle on the Connecticut River.

The fieldstone castle above Hadlyme Ferry was built from 1914-1919, at the height of the actor's career. Gillette financed the construction with profits from his highly successful Sherlock Holmes plays. It's estimated he spent more than a million dollars to build the castle, where no two of its 47 hand-hewn doors are exactly alike.

Resident, though, expressed concerns that the renovations and new construction would

cheapen or degrade the castle historical sanctity.

Borrowing Gillette's favored pejorative, resident Lance Elwell said, "Blithering sapheads, if William Gillette was here and looked over these [plans,] he's say blithering sapheads."

Richard Clifford, the DEP's bureau chief for outdoor recreation, assured residents that the department's plans were sanctioned by the Connecticut Historical Commission, "and neither of us would ever allow destruction to the park's historical integrity."

Residents also worried that

the new attractions would increase traffic on residential streets to a park that already receives 310,000 visitors a year.

"River Road is extremely narrow and windy," said resident Logan Clarke. "The traffic it carries now is all the traffic it needs."

Adams said smaller touring groups and restrictions on parking will ensure the castle will not significantly receive greater traffic than already does.

"In my experience with reopening state parks ... after the first few weeks, it usually quiets down," she said.

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