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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**County Parks and Recreation and Grand Traverse Metro Fire Department Partner to Provide Training**

**Traverse City, MI** – A unique collaboration is making it possible for area fire departments and northern Michigan fire investigators to gain experience and learn the latest techniques in firefighter rescue and arson investigations. It all began because an abandoned farmhouse at Grand Traverse County’s Maple Bay Park and Natural Area needed to be removed to comply with a 2002 Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) Trust Fund Acquisition Grant Agreement with the County’s Parks and Recreation Department.

According to County Parks and Recreation Director Kristine Erickson, in 2003, different organizations were contacted by the Parks Department to move the house, but “they all declined because of its poor structural condition and the cost to move it.” Other reasons cited in an anecdotal history of Maple Bay Park were that costs to demolish were considered too high, and lead and asbestos needed to be removed before a controlled burn could be arranged. In 2005-2006, the Grand Traverse Regional Conservancy, which manages Maple Bay Park for Parks and Recreation, offered to have the house removed while removing other structures the Conservancy owned at Maple Bay, but it did not happen. “Our historical account ends there,” said Erickson.

In 2018, the grant requirement was revisited by County Parks and Recreation Commissioners, when they learned how dilapidated the house is and that there was evidence of recent break-ins. Commissioners directed Parks and Recreation staff to work with County Facilities Management staff to finally have the house removed. That prompted Facilities Management Director Joe Berry to approach Grand Traverse Metro Fire Department officials to propose a controlled burn of the house, and the fire chiefs were receptive. Lead and asbestos were removed, and from there, the plan to remove the house grew to a win-win for the county, area firefighters, northern Michigan fire investigators, and attorneys who prosecute and represent arson cases. According to Metro Fire Assistant Chief Brian Belcher, the Maple Bay house “will provide valuable training for many personnel for the next several months, and hands-on experience nearly impossible to replicate anywhere else.” Belcher expressed gratitude to Grand Traverse County for its support and for donating the structure.

Multiple types of training and related opportunities will take place at the house between now and the end of November, Belcher explained. Area fire units already are engaging in Rapid Intervention Team Training and May Day Training there, and on August 17 training to prepare for September’s Fire Investigator Training will begin with fires set in various rooms using furniture donated by Goodwill Industries. On September 5, fire investigators will determine the cause of the fires and on September 6 each fire investigator’s case will be heard during a mock trial. Additional exercises are scheduled between early September and late October, culminating in the house’s controlled burn by several area fire departments in November. “This is valuable instruction for regional firefighters and investigators at no cost to the county, which benefits our community and beyond,” said Erickson, “and ultimately makes our park safer.”

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