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Not so fast, some say about accepting Caroga amusement park: Petition seeks referendum

BY KYLE ADAMS Gazette Reporter The donation of the former Sherman's Amusement Park to the town of Caroga, officially accepted at a Town Board meeting earlier this month, seems likely to be brought to a public referendum, as opposition to the deal gathers momentum. The donation agreement has come under fire since its initial signing on Dec. 29 by town Supervisor Ralph Ottuso for what opponents call "less than iron-clad" wording and improper procedure. After a meeting of concerned citizens Thursday night at Town Hall, leaders of a committee appointed by the board in February to review the deal said they had gathered about 60 signatures on a petition to force a public referendum on the issue, well over the 45 needed. "We're not against acquiring Sherman's," said committee member Kent Kirch. "It's not so much about what's been done as how it's been done. That's the issue. We think that there's probably good reasons to accept that gift, but not under the current conditions." George Abdella, former owner of the property, donated the roughly 8.5 acres, appraised at \$3.1 million, to the town in hopes the park would once again be a center of life in the small Adirondack community. The former amusement park, once a booming summer destination, was built in the 1920s and purchased at a foreclosure auction in 1989 by Abdella and his wife. Legal questions were first raised by town resident Barbara Lee in a letter to the Town Board, her first complaint being that Ottuso had no authority to sign the contract without a formal resolution from the Town Board, a complaint remedied by the March 11 vote. Other concerns include the status of a wastewater treatment system on the property, improper subdivision and financial questions, such as how the town will pay for a public beach or renovation and maintenance of the pavilion and carousel on the property. "We don't know what we're getting, we don't know what we're going to do with it and we don't know what we're going to have to put into it to make it viable for whatever purpose we're going to use it," said Lee. "There's so much we don't know." Lee and several others were appointed to a committee in February to study the contract, but said their findings and recommendations were ignored at the board's March 11 meeting. Nearly 70 people attended Thursday night's meeting to listen to Lee explain the committee's findings and, in many cases, to sign the petition calling for a referendum. One Town Board member, Tony Sturchio, attended, but said he was doing so as a citizen and declined to comment on the proceedings. Ottuso could not be reached for comment Friday. While many at the meeting grumbled about the details and circumstances of the donation — Lee complained of "an awful lot of good old boy-ism" in the town — most seemed to agree Sherman's was and could again be a "gem" of the community, if done right. Scott Horton, a town resident and member of the Planning Board, noted that while the town was developing its comprehensive plan, adopted in 2013, the redevelopment of Sherman's was brought up again and again as a high priority for development. "I don't think it was done as well as it could have been," he said of the deal, "but I also don't want us to go

backwards.” Lee said Friday she and others will continue collecting signatures as long as possible, up to 45 days after the initial Town Board decision, then submit the petition to the town clerk. It is unclear when a referendum would be set or what the wording would be.