

A quarter million dollars has been granted to the Searsport Middle High School to foster their transition toward experiential and outdoor education. The grant has already funded teacher professional development in project based and service learning practices, allowed the school to acquire outdoor education related supplies and hire an Experiential Education and Community Outreach Coordinator (ELCO) for one year. The capstone project afforded by this funding, the Viking Longhouse, is awaiting townspeople's approval and will become the most exciting new development in Searsport this year.

Searsport Middle High School will construct a replica of an ancient Viking longhouse behind the school. It will be an outdoor classroom and the symbol for the school district's emphasis on experiential, hands-on learning. The money comes from a grant through a Maine Department of Education program called Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) and it has funded projects at many schools throughout Maine. Searsport was awarded the grant for its initiative called the Viking Longhouse Program, that staff developed through a collaborative process to incorporate outdoor and experiential education more significantly and frequently into the curriculum. The Longhouse building will be constructed behind the Middle High School, at the entryway to the campus trail network. Since it will be built upon school property, there is a referendum required on the ballot. After an anticipated referendum approval, the school will navigate the bid and award process by the end of the year, with building to begin by spring. It should be completed by end of the school year and must be completed before end of the fiscal year.

The impacts of the grant are already rippling through the school system with spin-off initiatives creating an exciting new atmosphere. For example, the campus trail network connects to the Mill Brook Preserve managed by Coastal Mountains Land Trust (CMLT) and they have received a grant to enhance the educational value of the trails for Searsport students. Put together, these initiatives should address the wishes of students and teachers to make learning more fun and engaging by making it experiential. The Longhouse will offer shelter and room for classes to be held outside and will foster community among students and teachers. There are related projects underway to ensure that outdoor clothing is available to keep students comfortable outside and initiatives to involve students in the design and construction phases of the project. The Viking Longhouse will be a facility to inspire pride in Searsport Schools for years to come.

The Viking Longhouse will also be a community asset and a symbol of Searsport Schools' burgeoning involvement in the town with an emphasis on volunteerism and internship opportunities on regular offer for high school students. Searsport is a small town and the community is eager for student participation from the Town Office to Hamilton Marine to the Penobscot Marine Museum. There is a world full of potential for Searsport students starting right here in Searsport and the Viking Longhouse Program and the ELCO Coordinator are here to develop those opportunities.