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The Record (Bergen County, NJ)

August 8, 2001 Wednesday Two Star P

EXPLORATORY DIG ALLOWED ON LENAPE SITE; VERNONWANTS DEEPER STUDY OF SOIL STRUCTURE

SOURCE: The Record

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SECTION: NEWS; Pg. 103

LENGTH: 726 words

DATELINE: VERNON

A state judge Tuesday gave permission for an exploratory dig on a milleniums-old Leni-Lenape Indian site that the township wants to turn into a sprawling sports field complex.

The Lenape, New Jersey's original inhabitants, have joined a local archaeologist's lawsuit to block Vernon from building the 180-acre complex.

The lawsuit contends the project would destroy a 35-acre site along Black Creek that hosted a string of thriving native villages over a 10,000-year period.

State Superior Court Judge Kenneth MacKenzie in Newton, who issued the order allowing a township-hired company to dig, imposed an injunction last month blocking the complex until the lawsuit is resolved.

The planned dig, known as a geomorphological study, entails 10 8-foot-by-8-foot test pits to be excavated by a backhoe -- a detail that has angered Lenape arguing for the site's preservation.

Lenape leaders from across the state -- in South Jersey and the Ramapo Mountains of Bergen and Passaic counties -- have rallied around protection of the Black Creek site in recent months. Backing them are Lenape from Oklahoma, where the largest concentration of the Indian tribe now lives after a forced migration in the 1800s.

Previous studies along Black Creek and adjacent lands have yielded thousands of arrowheads, spear tips, crude tools, and other signs of longtime occupation. Most of those investigations were done on the soil surface.

But township officials reject those studies as incomplete -- including one Vernon itself commissioned last year. The township contends the site may have been occupied only sporadically.

"We all know there are surface artifacts," Township Attorney Joseph Ragno said. "The issue is not whether there is history there, but whether the site has an integrity that makes it archaeologically valuable." Eager to feed the recreation needs of Vernon's booming population, officials have designed a complex with a pool, fieldhouse, and more than two dozen playing fields, rinks, and courts, where youths would play soccer, lacrosse, baseball, football, tennis, basketball, and roller hockey.

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The site would be large enough to host regional tournaments, Ragno said.

No Lenape live in Vernon today, having been uprooted by European immigrants and inter-tribal warfare in the mid-1800s. The farmers who took their place also are increasingly rare in the Sussex County community, which is on the westward edge of the metropolitan area's expanding suburban ring.

The Warwick firm conducting the township's dig, LaPorta and Associates, will not focus on actual artifacts. Instead, the firm will examine the soil structure to see if it could potentially yield an archeological site as described by the Lenape.

Walter Van Dunk, chief of the Ramapo Lenape, said the use of the backhoe in the study was "ridiculous. " "What is he expecting to find with a backhoe? " Van Dunk asked, referring to Philip LaPorta, the leader of the study. "The only thing they're trying to do is destroy what's in there so that they can say nothing's there. " **Greg Werkheiser**, who represents the Lenape in their lawsuit, said that despite the use of the backhoe, he was eager to see the dig's results.

"The township will now have the opportunity to satisfy itself as to what everyone in the archaeological community already knows, that this site is undoubtedly historically significant. " Ragno said the study will start Monday and finish the next day.

Besides the lawsuit, those hoping to stop the project have also applied for a listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The nomination will be heard Sept. 12 before the New Jersey Review Board for Historic Sites.

The township's study must be submitted to the review board at least 14 days before that meeting. If the historic designation is granted, the state Department of Environmental Protection could force the township to alter its sports field complex so it would not affect the Lenape site.

Richard Grubb, whose firm conducted the prior Black Creek study for the township, said he expected the dig to yield just what his team found: more artifacts from the Lenape and their predecessors.

"They don't want anybody to find anything, but it's there," Grubb said. "It's not going to go away. " Staff Writer Matthew Brown's e-mail address is brownma(at)northjersey.com

LOAD-DATE: August 8, 2001

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH