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LENAPE WIN BATTLE OVER ANCIENT LAND ; PANELURGES SAVING VERNON SITE

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Lenni Lenape tribal leaders on Wednesday won a showdown against Vernon and its plan to turn an ancient village site into ballfields, as a state review panel said the 35 acres should be protected as historic.

The decision throws into doubt the Sussex County township's proposal for a massive recreation complex along Black Creek, deep in North Jersey's Highlands.

Tribal leaders said Wednesday's action was a "milestone" moment for New Jersey's native Lenape -- now scattered across a dozen states and two countries.

"We're not a history book. We're not dust on a shelf. We're alive," proclaimed Urie Ridgeway of the Nanticoke Lenape Tribal Council.

"Our children can come back someday and say, 'This is where my ancestors lived, where they prayed, where they had children.'" The recommendation to preserve the land was made by the State Review Board for Historic Sites. It will go to Commissioner of Environmental Protection Robert Shinn, who has final say.

Based on the evidence of collected artifacts, Indian villages may have stood on the site for 10,000 years, shielded from latter-day European influence by the glacier-carved walls of 1,400-foot Wawayanda Mountain, say archaeologists who studied the site.

The bowl-shaped Black Creek tract was used as cornfields for a century, until the township bought it last year as part of a \$1.1 million, 180-acre package. The dispute over the land's future has pitted the Lenape and historic preservationists against what Vernon Mayor John Logan referred to as "my tribe -- the 25,000 residents of Vernon Township." After almost four hours of testimony Wednesday, six of eight members of the State Review Board for Historic Sites supported the Lenape's claim that the site should be listed on the New Jersey historic registry.

But Vernon officials still could push their plan through with the right State House maneuvering. Logan vowed to appeal the decision to Shinn.

And the township has a formidable Trenton ally in Republican state Sen. Robert Littell.

Littell, a 34-year Sussex County lawmaker and chairman of the powerful Budget Oversight Committee, said Wednesday that he would intervene during the 45 days Shinn has to review the historic-registry recommendation.

"You find a handful of arrowheads, you don't know if someone put them there or if they've been there a long time," Littell said. "I'll certainly try and talk to the commissioner and see what he has to say.

This whole thing is getting out of hand. " Shinn would not have to reject the Lenape's nomination outright to meet the township's objectives. Logan said the boundaries of the historic area could be tightened so the designation would not affect the planned ballfields.

Lenape attorney **Greg Werkheiser** said any changes made by Shinn to the historic nomination would be appealed. On Wednesday, the Lenape portrayed the battle over Black Creek as already won, celebrating outside the historic review board with songs and drumming.

If approved by Shinn, the Vernon land would become the fourth Native American site to make the state historic registry.

Thousands of hunting weapons, stone tools, and other primitive artifact have been collected on the surface of the Vernon site. Most were found by local archaeologist Richard Patterson, who brought his fight to protect the site to the Lenape when the township unveiled its recreation proposal.

The Nanticoke Lenape of South Jersey and the Ramapo Indians in the Oakland area are the only two Lenape groups remaining in New Jersey. But other Lenape from Oklahoma, Ontario, Pennsylvania, and Delaware have joined in their call for the preservation of the Black Creek site.

About 40 Lenape were in Trenton Wednesday, along with an Apache representative of the once-militant American Indian Movement.

Littell has sponsored legislation that would have given Vernon veto power over the Lenape's historic site nomination. That bill -- heard by the Senate Environment Committee two weeks ago -- did not move quickly enough to affect the case.

If Shinn approves the review board's recommendation, the township's plans would need to be redrawn to avoid damaging the Black Creek site.

Vernon officials envision the ultimate suburban sports complex: fields for soccer, football, baseball, and lacrosse; courts for roller hockey, tennis, and basketball; an outdoor amphitheater, and a community center with an indoor pool.

Vernon's township manager has said the entire project might be unfeasible without the Black Creek land -- the flattest piece of the 180 acres. But Township Attorney Joseph Ragno said Wednesday that much of the project could be realized even with a historic designation.

"The fallacy is that these Indians think this project won't be developed. It just gets developed by DEP [Department of Environmental Protection] guidelines," he said.

Under DEP rules, development proposals with historic register components must be revised to mitigate the impact on the historic site.

They cannot be rejected outright.

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