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Native American site in Vernon wins U.S. protection

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VERNON - The federal government has given historic landmark status to the Black Creek site where Native Americans lived for thousands of years, saving it from potential development into a municipal sports complex.

In a victory for the Leni-Lenape tribe and archaeologists who had opposed the township plan, the U.S. Department of the Interior has declared the site a national historic landmark. The designation adds clout to New Jersey's decision earlier this year to place the site on its state register of historic places.

"That means that Black Creek is truly a national treasure," said **Greg Werkheiser**, attorney for the Nanticoke Leni-Lenape, who fought to save the land from being developed. "This raises this site from being a local concern to national concern."

Commemorating the event, Chief Joseph Brooks, leader of the Delaware Tribe of the Leni-Lenape, has flown in from Oklahoma and was to tour the site today at 1 p.m.

The Department of the Interior designated the site as a national historic landmark on Nov. 27 - a status that saves the land from development in perpetuity. In April, the state Department of Environmental Protection placed the site on its register of historic places - making it nearly impossible for Vernon to go through with its plans to build ball fields on the site.

Vernon, however, is appealing New Jersey's decision. Werkheiser said the federal government's action shows that the odds are stacked against Vernon's winning the dispute.

On Friday, Mayor John Logan refused to comment about the newest site designation, other than to say, "I really have nothing to say about the matter."

The national designation and Brooks' tour mark the latest dramatic chapter in the three-year battle over the Black Creek tract, nestled in one of Vernon's spectacular glacier-carved valleys. Vernon Township wanted to build a sports complex at the 40-acre site it bought in 2000, but a local archeologist, Richard Patterson, led the drive to save the land.

The site was found to contain a treasure trove of more than 15,000 artifacts - including beads, pottery, and stone tools - some dating to 8,000 B.C. To Native Americans, the land is sacred, and also important because so much of their history has been plowed under.

"Every single indigenous population in New Jersey is represented at that site," said Jesse Paladini, a Vernon

resident active in the preservation fight.

Paladini pointed out that when it comes to historic markers, Native Americans are often overlooked. She said that in New Jersey, there are more than 1,500 residential structures on the state's historic register, - but only two sites that recall the presence of Native Americans.

Vernon Township still owns the land. But a national non-profit group, the Archeological Conservancy, has offered to buy it from the township.

Black Creek is part of a 180-acre tract of former farmland that Vernon bought for \$1.1 million. Few could argue that Vernon didn't need more athletic facilities. The township's population has doubled in the past 20 years. But the plan put forth by Logan's administration was massive: as many as 12 new ball fields, an outdoor concert hall, and hiking trails.

Others argued that the price of progress should not come at the expense of Native American culture, and it wasn't long before the sports complex proposal became a battleground. Vernon officials dug in. At one point, when preservationists took the township to court, Vernon went ahead with plans to bulldoze part of the site, even while testimony was being heard in Superior Court. The court immediately issued an injunction to stop the bulldozers.

Vernon still plans to build a sports complex around the Black Creek site, but those plans were dealt a setback last November when voters rejected a \$2 million financing plan for the project.

"Right now, it's up in the air as to how we are going to proceed," said Don Teolis, the township manager.

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