

32 of 44 DOCUMENTS

The Record (Bergen County, NJ)

March 28, 2002 Thursday Two Star P

VERNON MAY BLOCK STATE FROM SAVING LENAPE SITE

SOURCE: The Record

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SECTION: NEWS; Pg. 101

LENGTH: 735 words

DATELINE: VERNON

Township officials are attempting an end-run around a state historic review board in a last-ditch bid to build a massive recreation complex where an Indian village thrived in prehistoric days.

Lenape Indians may have inhabited the 40-acre Black Creek site in the Walkkill River Valley for up to 10,000 years, say archaeologists who have studied the area.

Twenty-three acres are already protected by a state historic designation.

But with a formal decision on the remaining 17 acres still pending, the Sussex County township this month began seeking construction bids to build recreation fields on the land. Contractor bids are due by April 1. That's just two days before the New Jersey State Review Board could approve the 17 acres for historic designation, effectively barring development.

If the construction bids are secured first, state regulatory powers over the site would be drastically curtailed, state environmental officials said. The 17 acres might then be developed into two football fields, as township officials plan.

Greg Werkheiser, a Washington, D.C., attorney representing a coalition of Lenape Indians trying to protect the disputed 17 acres, said the township was engaged in "a devious attempt to circumvent the state review process." Shielded from outside influence for centuries by 1,400-foot-high Wawayanda Mountain, the Lenape village's occupants left behind a trove of thousands of artifacts, including arrowheads, spear tips, and crude stone tools. A plum-size effigy stone associated with Lenape burials was found on the site.

Lenape leaders from South Jersey, Oklahoma, and Canada have urged protection of the land. Local archaeologist Richard Patterson claims to have found more than 3,000 artifacts on the site. Archaeologists who worked for the state on an adjacent site have backed up Patterson's claims about the Black Creek site, saying artifacts from the area date to 6,000 B.C and earlier.

But efforts to preserve the site have collided with Vernon's recent evolution into a suburban community. Mayor John Logan has made new youth sports facilities a top priority, and he has determinedly pushed plans for the 180-acre Maple Grange recreation complex, which originally included all 40 acres with archaeological significance.

The 180 acres were bought by the township in 2000 for about \$1.1 million. Prior to that, the site had been tilled as farmland for decades. The 40-acre archaeological site was earlier estimated at 35 acres. A state Department of Environmental Protection survey determined it was in fact five acres larger.

The football fields planned for the 17 acres under dispute would be the first section of Maple Grange to be built. Township Manager Meredith Robson said it was "easier" to build on that piece first because it is only a small part of the property.

"We're just moving forward," Robson said. "We've been saying all along we wanted to do this, and we're just moving forward." When asked whether the township's actions would in effect circumvent the state review process, Robson said she was "not up on the technical aspects" of the state's historic protection regulations.

Tribal Chairman Mark Gould of the Nanticoke Lenape in South Jersey, said in a statement that the township was "showing a blatant and intentional disregard for the Lenape people." "I would argue that Vernon Township continues to attempt development of the site in an effort to erase the history of the Lenape people," Gould's statement said.

Werkheiser, the Lenapes' attorney, said he had requested an emergency state Superior Court hearing to complain about the township's solicitation of construction bids.

Township bulldozers had started to level the 17 disputed acres last year even as a state Superior Court judge was hearing testimony on stopping the project. The work was quickly stopped by court injunction, though not before numerous artifacts were pushed into large mounds of dirt.

Later, the township -- working through state Sen. Robert Littell, R-Franklin -- pushed for legislation that would have altered the state historic designation process. That bill, to prevent outside parties from nominating sites as historic, might have put a hitch in the Lenapes' push for a historic designation.

The bill was passed by both houses of the Legislature but was never signed by the governor into law.

LOAD-DATE: March 28, 2002

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH