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VERNON'S PRIVATE DEP MEETING IRKS ACTIVISTS; SEEN AS ATTEMPT TO DERAIL SITE'S HISTORIC DESIGNATION

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A dispute is heating up over Native American artifacts found in a former cornfield that Vernon wants to turn into a municipal sports complex.

While archaeologists on both sides prepared for Wednesday's public hearing on whether the 35-acre Black Creek tract should be considered as a national historic site, Mayor John Logan was in Trenton conferring with state officials in charge of the agency that handles historic site nominations.

"The Vernon folks had some questions and wanted to understand the process," a DEP spokeswoman, Sharon Southard, said of the Friday meeting that included Logan and top-level Department of Environmental Protection officials.

Local archaeologist Rick Patterson, who submitted the historic-site nomination for the Black Creek tract, had a different take on the DEP meeting, to which he was not invited.

"They're trying to stop it any way they can," he said of Vernon officials.

Logan did not reply to a telephone message seeking his comment.

Greg Werkheiser, a lawyer for the Nanticoke Leni Lenape Tribe of New Jersey, said he was astounded to learn of the closed-door meeting in Trenton shortly before a public hearing.

"Our hope is that this remains a matter of the facts, not a matter of politics," he said. "The Lenape, indeed tribes across the United States, have their focus on this. " Both sides will square off Wednesday at a hearing by the State Review Board for Historic Sites.

Vernon wants to use the site, off Maple Grange Road, as part of a 180-acre complex of sports fields and an amphitheater.

Patterson's nomination of the site for the National Register of Historic Places rests on his research and his finding of a trove of arrowheads, spear tips, rock hammers, crude drills, adzes, and shards of pottery dating back about 10,000 years.

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He is backed by the Lenni Lenape tribe, which sent an archaeologist to Vernon to investigate the disputed site.

Patterson and Vernon officials previously clashed in state Superior Court, where the local archaeologist and lawyers for the Lenni Lenape won an injunction that halted construction until the site's historic value can be determined.

Vernon hired geologist Philip LaPorta to excavate last month.

Officials point to his report as proof that the claims are overblown.

"The results of our preliminary investigation suggest a low probability of encountering deeply stratified cultural deposits, signs of long-term village occupation, or the presence of prehistoric burials," LaPorta said in a summary of his field work, in which he used a backhoe to dig 10 deep pits.

But the report of Cara Blum, a Delaware state government archaeologist engaged by the Lenni Lenape tribe, offered a different view.

"The Black Creek site is an unusually intact and complex site situated in a diverse environment that supported Native American settlement from at least the Early Archaic Period until the Lenape people left the valley before the mid-18th century," Blum concluded in her report to the state review board.

New Jersey has three Native American archaeological sites on the national historic register, according to the State Historic Preservation Office.

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