

Historic site gains ground in Vernon State ruling a victory for preservationists

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Body

In their fight to have "not one inch" of a historic Native American site in Vernon converted into ballfields, preservationists may end up getting more than they bargained for.

In December, the state Review Board for Historic Sites recommended about 35 acres of land known as the Black Creek site along Maple Grange Road be designated as historic.

It was a victory for preservationists, who feared the site would be lost because it was part of a 180-acre tract of township-owned land purchased for a recreational complex.

However, the review board was not sure of the historic site's exact boundary and sent its recommendation to Robert Shinn, commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection at the time, for approval.

In January, Shinn listed 31 of the 35 acres as historic but sent the matter back to the board for further study about the rest of the boundary.

In anticipation of an April 3 hearing by the review board, the state Office of Historic Preservation prepared aerial photos of the site that show its boundary, and the site now amounts to 40 acres.

This has Vernon Mayor John Logan fuming over what he sees as an unwarranted expansion of the historic section into areas needed for ballfields.

"My concern is the state is selling us out. They're not standing up for Vernon," Logan said. "All we're looking for all along is compromise. Their position is 'not one inch.' With the preservationists and Indians, a win-win situation means two wins for them."

But preservation proponents disagree, noting Shinn's selection of 31 acres was hand-drawn in marker on a township design of where ballfields would go.

Shinn's boundary cut through a house and failed to include the Maple Grange Road bridge area that were parts of the historic nomination application, and also left out a farmfield that is a key part of the historic site, said Rick Patterson, an archaeologist and leading preservation proponent.

"Originally, the whole site was going to be listed, and as I recognized it, it was about 35 acres," Patterson said. "It's all screwed up because of the politics the township is doing. When it went through machinations in Trenton, the whole south field was taken out."

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Al Ivany, a spokesman for the State Office of Historic Preservation, said, "You can consider it revised, because it's much more extensive and elaborate based on GIS (geographic information system) maps. The entire site was not entered initially (as historic), and they're just looking to get the rest in there."

Greg Werkheiser, an attorney representing the Lenni Lenape, said Shinn asked to have the boundary clarified, and that's what was done.

"There's not a single acre that's been added to the site," Werkheiser said. "When we got the GIS maps and scientific photos of the land itself, it revealed the site is closer to 40 acres than 35. But no land has been added to the site."

But Logan says that under the new 40-acre boundary, the township's recreational complex would either lose two football fields and parking lots, or a significant amount of money would have to be spent doing archaeological remediation.

The Black Creek site has been the focus of bitter debate for nearly two years.

After the township purchased the land, Patterson came forward with a trove of Native American artifacts that he had uncovered on the site during the past decade. The artifacts are believed to span a timeframe from 8,000 B.C. to the first contact with European settlers.

Last year, Patterson and the Bridgeton-based Nanticoke Lenni Lenape sued the township to prevent the site's destruction. Township officials have doubted the site is as historically significant as preservationists claim, and say it should not bar the construction of any recreational fields.

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