

# Heritage area designation raises hackles

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**BISMARCK** - It was a tough sell for promoters of the Northern Plains Heritage Area, a new federal designation to promote heritage and history in five counties on the Missouri River.

The heritage area board held a public meeting Monday night in Bismarck to begin explaining the federal designation, which was signed into law in March, and to gather input from the public.

The public showed up, all right - about 160 people primarily from the rural area - but the input was mostly negative, much of it blisteringly so.

Tracy Potter, who headed the campaign to get the designation from Congress and is on the board, opened the meeting by explaining everything the heritage area is not, instead of what it is.

Potter said property cannot be acquired, developed or accessed without the landowner's permission.

Instead, he said the heritage area is intended to build on the historical strengths along the river.

He said the board will go out to all five counties for input and begin writing a management plan that he expects will take at least a year, though it has three years to do so.

When the microphone was opened up, all heck broke loose.

If there were voices of support in the audience, they were silent.

Instead, people lined up to voice their distrust and out-and-out disapproval of the designation, getting vigorous applause and some amen-like shouts for doing so.

Clint Fleckenstein said he bought a small bit of land and now feels like he has a \$15 million "babysitting job" keeping track of how the federal money that's available because of the designation will be spent.

Bob Wetsch, who lives south of Mandan, kept his comments brief and succinct.

"I want to make this perfectly clear; I don't want anything to do with this. I don't want to have to opt out (of being included in the heritage area), or come to more of these meetings," Wetsch said.

Neil Effertz, of rural Bismarck, said the designation was devised without any input from landowners. "How many individual property owners were consulted and asked if they were in favor of this \$15 million project? Over 90 percent of those here weren't," he said.

Burleigh County Commissioner Jim Peluso, said he was speaking for himself in saying the heritage area designation is too broad and that instead of a broad five-county brush, it should be painted down to the actual historical sites within the counties.

"No one's against history or preservation, but this is an unnecessary burden for these people to defend their property rights," Peluso said.

Some speakers railed against Sen. Byron Dorgan for sponsoring the designation, and against Potter for telling Congress the heritage designation has public support when the public didn't know about it until it was a done deal.

Wayne Ruzicka, of Wilton, called for Potter's resignation, saying the whole project will always be suspect because public support was misrepresented when, in fact, no one was aware until the designation was a done deal.

Afterward, Potter said even though it was a tough meeting, it "needed to happen. We knew people would be upset because of the misconception. This is not affecting anyone's land."

Despite the call for him to leave the board and for the board to be reconfigured with more landowners, Potter said he'd stay unless the board asked him to leave.