

Heritage group needs to mend fences

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Tribune Editorial

BISMARCK - Landowners have every right to be concerned when the federal government wants to include them in a special heritage area. They are going to have questions, and they are going to need answers. In that give-and-take conversation, those landowners may support or oppose a project. But without that conversation, the seeds of discontent are sown.

Even if it's a good thing.

The Missouri River Valley in McLean, Mercer, Oliver, Morton and Burleigh counties will make up a new federal Northern Plains Heritage Area. Its purpose is to enhance tourism and develop cultural heritage resources and agricultural history sites. It's to be a vehicle for federal grants. The NPHA cannot own property, nor will it regulate zoning or land use.

But some landowners are upset, to the point of opting out of the NPHA. They believe that efforts by Tracy Potter, executive director of the Fort Abraham Lincoln Foundation, which along with the Fort Mandan Lewis and Clark Foundation requested the designation, fell short of the required public involvement necessary for the designation.

While Potter spoke to city and county commissions up and down the river about the proposed designation, and those meetings were public, they were not widely publicized public hearings. And they believe Potter then oversold the public involvement to a congressional committee.

The National Park Service, with which heritage areas are affiliated, agreed with the indignant property owners. But Congress passed the designation, and President Obama signed it into law March 30.

Landowners were left wondering what had happened. That doesn't make for good neighbors.

After the fact, we find there are strong protections for landowners in the setup for the Northern Plains Heritage Area. Hopefully, most of the landowners will stick.

Over the past couple of decades, cultural heritage sites in the Garrison Reach of the Missouri River have been preserved and with local, state and federal funds developed to be shared.

The NPHA designation should help further preserve and develop resources - Double Ditch, Knife River Indian Villages and other lesser-developed sites. Clearly, the Missouri River Valley between Bismarck-Mandan and Garrison Dam holds valuable cultural resources related to American Indian life, homesteading and riverboats. Having another tool in financing those projects makes sense.

It would be a good thing if the landowners along the Garrison Reach were supportive of these projects. And if the NPHA was a good neighbor, the landowners might feel a little more friendly. Potter and the NPHA have some fences to mend.