

Mercer County landowners have their say

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STANTON – Although meeting organizers admitted the meeting was poorly-advertised, more than 30 concerned residents from throughout Mercer County still turned out last Tuesday evening at the Mercer County Courthouse in Stanton to have their say in the management of the Northern Plains National Heritage Area.

Tuesday's meeting was led by Tracy Potter, executive director of the Fort Abraham Lincoln Foundation and founding president of the Northern Plains National Heritage Foundation. He's currently serving as the foundation's spokesperson and is conducting public meetings within all five counties included in the NPNHA.

According to Potter, the purpose of the meetings is to "take public comment on what the national heritage area should be and what shape the national heritage should take." Potter will then use public input to devise a management plan for the NPNHA, which must include a plan for telling and preserving the story and resources of the heritage area, specify funding to accomplish the area's goals, and include an inventory of the natural, historical, cultural, educational, scenic and recreational resources of the area relating to the significance of the area.

Heritage Area History

The NPNHA arrived inside the bulky Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009, signed into law by Pres. Barack Obama on March 30, 2009. The NPNHA consists of a core of area of resources in Burleigh, McLean, Mercer, Morton and Oliver Counties and any public sites, buildings, and districts within the core area that are officially recommended for inclusion in the heritage area. Private lands are excluded from the Heritage Area unless the landowner applies for inclusion. The heritage area is anchored by Huff Indian Villages State Historic Site on the south and the Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site, near Stanton, on the north end.

The development of the NPNHA began in 2005 with a feasibility study conducted within the five affected counties, which was later accused of not collecting sufficient public input. Upon discovery in 2009 of their inclusion in the heritage area, many private property owners felt the established area would threaten their property rights. In response to those concerns, Sen. Byron Dorgan helped pass legislation in September 2009 that read private lands were to be excluded from the NPNHA unless the landowner applied for inclusion.

A heritage area by definition is a place designated by Congress for the "preservation of history in areas of distinctive human impact on the landscape." The NPNHA is authorized up to \$10 million over 15 years in federal matching funds for heritage tourism projects, which could mean grant opportunities for cities, counties, nonprofit organizations or individuals. This fiscal year, the area was appropriated \$150,000 in federal funding. Every federal grant dollar must be matched, Potter noted.

Proponents say the federal designation will help promote and develop areas of historical significance within our area. Opponents say it's just one more federal designation upon their land that could infringe on their private property rights.

Private Land Concerns

Potter began the meeting by addressing private property concerns.

"There is no regulatory authority within the National Heritage Area," Potter said. "It's to protect places that you say, 'This is significant. This is a significant attraction that would attract people from around the nation, and maybe the world,' " Potter said.

Potter said there is currently only public land such as Knife River Indian Villages, Cross Ranch State Park and the state Capitol grounds that are included in the heritage area.

North Dakota Farm Bureau Board director Wes Klein, Hazen, said he sees the heritage area as one more step toward "permanent preservation," the likes of a national park.

"We are the best stewards, and no federal money should be coming in to tell us (private landowners) what we can or can't do. This federal legislation and others like it scares off development of every kind," Klein said. "I do have very grave concerns of what this federal designation could do to private property."

Klein noted that for many area landowners, this is the second federal designation on their land. The first was the Lewis and Clark Legacy Trail that traces across 23 private properties.

"Mr. Potter, we're already living under a federal designation. We're a people of private property ... We know our sense of place," Klein said. "We don't need federal money being poured into North Dakota to tell us we have or don't have a sense of place."

District 33 Sen. Randy Christmann, a landowner just west of Hazen, also voiced concerns at the meeting, referencing restrictions extending beyond the borders of Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

"Does the area have a reach beyond boundaries, such as viewshed?" Christmann asked.

TRNP superintendent Valerie Naylor was in attendance, and specified that TRNP is a Class 1 National Park, while the heritage area would not be part of the National Park System.

Klein also referenced an instance where access to a navigable waterway was restricted because downstream it flowed through a heritage area.

"Public use and access to navigable waters should not be restricted," attendee Joe Grannis, Stanton, recommended for inclusion in the management plan.

Other concerns centered on zoning within the heritage area—which Potter noted would fall on local zoning boards—as well as the seeming propensity for future legislation to morph federal designations over time with little or no warning.

"I don't know how you can specifically address things that happen over time," Christmann said.

Telling the Story

What the NPNHA would do, Potter said, is tell this area's story to the entire world.

Ray Kerns, rural Stanton, is a long-time active member of the Knife River Indian Heritage Foundation, a friends group to Knife River Indian Villages. He helps coordinate educational programs through the park that reach thousands of students each year.

"I would like some help ... in expanding on these projects. I see some things in here where I could help some children ... and have a real positive experience with this," Kerns said of the heritage area.

Proponents noted that the KRIHF might have difficulty matching the matching fund requirements of the available federal grants, though could use technical assistance such as grant writing and ideas for new projects.

Other proponents, such as NPNHF board members Rose Lansing and KRIVNHS ranger Dorothy Cook, mentioned the possibility of grants both helping to tell the story of the Indian Villages as well as promoting and improving upon local agricultural, energy and recreational tourism aspects.

Where From Here?

The management plan must be finished and submitted to the U.S. Secretary of the Interior by March 30, 2012. The heritage area then must become self-funding by 2025. To help achieve that status, the foundation was authorized \$10 million over a 15-year period, though they will not be appropriated more than \$1 million per year and must return to place funding requests each year, Potter said.

At the time of the NPNHA's adoption there were 49 other heritage areas throughout the nation. None have achieved self-sustainability in the 15-year window, Potter noted, and must be reauthorized.

"It's our hope that's not the case with the Northern Plains National Heritage Area," Potter said. "It really does matter if the heritage area becomes self-sustaining."

The NPNHF has held public comment hearings in Oliver and Mercer counties, and are scheduled to host a meeting in Morton County at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park. Once the management plan is written, one more meeting will be held to collect public comment and the plan, along with additional comments, will be submitted to the U.S. Secretary of the Interior for approval.

The NPNHF needs to answer several questions before finalizing a management plan, though it's important it's a plan that protects private property rights, Potter said.

For more information and to view the NPNHA feasibility study, visit www.northernplainsheritage.org.