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Special Announcement Regarding the Shawnee Indian Mission State Historic Site

1 message

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Shawnee Tribal Chief Seeks to Acquire Historic Site in Fairway

Earlier today, the City of Fairway learned that Shawnee Tribal Chief Ben Barnes is beginning a media campaign regarding potential legislative action to acquire the Shawnee Indian Mission State Historic Site. This effort is being prefaced by a study performed by Architectural Resource Group (ARG) based in California. This report supposes the historic structures at the site need imminent, significant repair to save the buildings. Despite the City's full cooperation in providing ARG unfettered access to prepare this report, the Shawnee Tribe has yet to provide a copy of the findings to the City. Additionally, it is the City's understanding that ARG requested minimal historical information from the Kansas Historical Society (KHS), the state agency which has owned and preserved the site for nearly 100 years, when preparing the details of the report. This fact is unfortunate as KHS has historical records for much of the work performed in its efforts to preserve the site. These records would have undoubtedly aided in the creation of a more comprehensive study by ARG.

Under the current agreement between the City and KHS, the City manages the day-to-day operations with financial assistance from the Shawnee Indian Mission Foundation (SIMF) while KHS maintains ownership and is responsible for major maintenance and all preservation efforts. KHS receives its funding from the Kansas Legislature.

Sadly, this attempt by Chief Barnes to disparage KHS and the City over the conditions of the buildings is not his first. In the spring of last year, Chief Barnes lobbied a national organization to label the site as "endangered" using the same ARG report mentioned above. Fortunately, that designation did not occur, though we anticipate that issue has not fully passed.

Based on previous conversations with City officials, we believe these efforts are all driven toward one purpose. Chief Barnes' has communicated that his ultimate goal is to acquire the land of the Shawnee Indian Mission State Historic Site. Chief Barnes has previously expressed that the Shawnee Tribe has more resources than KHS to apply at the site though he has not presented any proof of his statements. In fact, Chief Barnes has had to rely on obtaining grants in order to perform some of these studies.

The Kansas Historical Society is on record as opposing conveyance of the site to the Shawnee Tribe due to the sites' historical significance to the state. It is widely considered the most historically significant site in the state of Kansas. In 1927, the State of Kansas used eminent domain to acquire twelve acres of former Mission land which contained the three original brick buildings. It is the only time Kansas acquired a historic site in such a way. The Santa Fe, California and Oregon trails all passed by the Shawnee Indian Mission. The oldest, still standing residence in Kansas is now known as the West Building. It is the 2nd oldest brick and mortar structure in the state. In addition to serving as its namesake, the Mission was where the vote occurred for Kansas to become a state. It served as the executive office for the first territorial governor and the place where the Bogus Legislature voted to make Kansas a slave state which, in part, led to what is referred to as the period of "Bleeding Kansas". It also served as a civil war encampment for union soldiers with a battle occurring near the grounds in 1864. In the late 1930's, the Department of Interior identified it as one of the most important sites in the entire Midwest region of the country. The Shawnee Indian Mission was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1968.

Should the land be conveyed to the Shawnee Tribe, there is no guarantee the site will remain open to the public. Further, there is no guarantee that the Shawnee Tribe would continue to maintain or preserve the buildings from their headquarters in Oklahoma. In fact, if the Shawnee Tribe were to acquire the site, there would be no guarantee it would remain a culturally and historically significant site, rather the Tribe could attempt to use the site for economic development. If the site is conveyed to the Shawnee Tribe, the City and the State may not have any governing authority on how the land is used.

It is for these reasons, the City is supportive of KHS's position that they are the best long-term stewards of such an important site. We believe it is important to learn the unvarnished history of the site and to share it with the community. There are many stakeholders when it comes to the Shawnee Indian Mission State Historic Site, including the other 22 Tribes who sent students to the school. We believe all of history is relevant and worth preserving and sharing for generations to come.

We will continue to provide updates when we have more information to share.

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