

**EDITORIAL COMMENT
and LETTERS TO
THE EDITOR**

Lorna Thackeray's positive profile of Little Bighorn Battlefield superintendent Denice Swanke in this issue contains one alarming note, however, concerning the long delayed implementation of the park's 1986 General Management Plan (GMP).

Talks towards this end between the National Monument's three major stakeholders, the Crow Tribe, Custer Battlefield Preservation Committee and National Park Service (NPS), have "stalled."

The major obstacle has been and apparently continues to be the transfer to the Park Service of the 3500 plus acres of Battlefield-related land acquired by the Preservation Committee, a donation that would realize the expansion of the park's boundaries proposed by the GMP's 1995 update. The NPS, however, will not accept the property without the consent of the Crow Tribe, which has opposed such expansion. Enabling congressional legislation may also be required.

After years of little or no progress towards implementation, the temporary relocation of the Battlefield's extensive museum collection to Arizona in 2011 suggested that the construction of a new Visitor Center at a different location and other components of the GMP would at last be realized. The move seemed, therefore, to provide the critical impetus for constructive dialogue and decision on this vision for the park.

The archives and artifacts had been transferred to the Western Archeological and Conservation Center in Tucson because the Battlefield facility is by all accounts inadequate to display, preserve, protect, store and secure them, as evidenced by water

damage to the building that spring. A new, expanded Visitor Center is thus a precondition of the collection's return to Montana after being inventoried, conserved and (where appropriate) digitized in Arizona.

In commenting on the relocation of the Battlefield's collection, a *Billings Gazette* editorial (April 5, 2011) aptly noted that the decision by the NPS "should serve as a wake-up call" to all stakeholders (both private and public) to "renew efforts to fund and build a visitor center that will allow the return of the archives to a permanent and worthy Montana home."

We also urge Battlefield stakeholders to support the implementation of the GMP. However, notwithstanding any such broad immediate consensus, the uncertain state of the economy and the Federal deficit crisis indicate that any public funding of a new Visitor Center is unlikely in the foreseeable future. This prospect is unfortunate because this goal is and should be clearly a nonpartisan issue in view of the positive cultural benefits and positive economic impact of Little Bighorn and other units in the National Park System.

The initiative must thus come from the private sector to raise the money, if not to design, plan and construct such a facility.

The construction of a new visitor center at Gettysburg National Military Park (at a new location) in 2008 should be an effective example as to how to implement this central component of Little Bighorn's GMP.

The private sector played a critical role in developing and paying for the 139,000 square foot Gettysburg facility, which was constructed at a total cost of \$125 million. Most of this funding was raised by the Gettysburg Foundation, a nonprofit organization that will own and operate this visitor center for 20 years in cooperation with the NPS.

Without question such an organization must be well-managed, open and transparent in its deliberations and receptive above all to diverse groups and views in order to be effective.

Several nonprofit Battlefield-related organizations, civic groups and tribal entities would form an excellent nucleus for a similar initiative at Little Bighorn. The membership of these organizations have the broad contacts, experiences and talents required to play this critical role.

Critical to this process is an open, constructive dialogue that assesses, considers and respects *all* views. In that spirit, comments and suggestions from each and every constituent and all interested parties should be welcomed *regardless* of perspective so as to facilitate the effective resolution of this issue.

Thus we must move forward to an effective solution that is a "win-win" for *all* who have a stake in the future of Little Bighorn Battlefield and a new Visitor Center.

Lee

The 1986 GMP as updated in 1995 may be obtained from the editor as a PDF file upon request.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The CBHMA welcomes the opinions of its members on issues involving the Association or the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.

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