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Rhetoric over proposed replacement mental hospital on Moccasin Bend heats up

Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians pushes back in resolution opposing new construction

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by [Ben Benton](#)

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148 Films / This aerial photograph of Moccasin Bend taken Feb. 6 shows the current state mental hospital slated for replacement, foreground, along with the adjacent 13-acre Winston building site, in the background to the left, where a replacement hospital is proposed to be constructed.

The rhetoric surrounding the proposed replacement of the 60-year-old Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute with a new facility constructed a few hundred yards away from the present one on the iconic Tennessee River peninsula continues to heat up as opponents and supporters of that site await an archaeological study to determine whether significant evidence of indigenous people exists there.

Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee proposed in his 2021 budget plan to use part of the state's share of federal American Rescue Plan funds to build a \$276 million mental health hospital in what would be one of the largest state building investments ever in Chattanooga. A resolution passed unanimously April 4 by

the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, based in Southwestern North Carolina, strongly opposes the proposed replacement hospital.

"The tribe opposes new construction activities on the Tennessee River peninsula, known as Moccasin Bend in Hamilton County, Tennessee," according to the resolution text read into the record at the April meeting, according to a meeting video. "Be it further resolved that the tribe supports efforts to preserve Moccasin Bend's, natural, historic and cultural resources. Be it finally resolved that all, prior resolutions that are inconsistent with this resolution are rescinded, and this resolution shall become effective when ratified by the principal chief."

During the meeting, the Eastern Band's principal chief, Michell Hicks, said the resolution fully spells out the tribe's opposition to a new facility on the bend that is joined by a former Tennessee congressman closely linked to Moccasin bend's preservation.

([READ. MORE: Moccasin Bend public forum seeks transparency, preservation](#))

"I think the resolution speaks for itself," Hicks told the Tribal Council on April 4. "It's been an ongoing issue. Former Congressman Zach Wamp has reached out on a number of occasions sharing his concern. I know that we've had conversations with our legislative updates around this issue. I think that we need to be as strong as we possibly can about protecting historical sites in any way that we possibly can. So, I'm in full support of this legislation."

Tribal Council member Perry Shell asked Hicks whether the two other federally-recognized Cherokee tribes — the Cherokee Nation and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma — had been asked to weigh in or join the effort.

"I know that the former congressman has reached out to them," Hick said of Wamp's involvement. "I need to find out where their particular legislation and/or letter is currently. I don't have a current update, but I'll find out."

While the tribe didn't have a representative at a public forum about the issue April 11 at the Skyline Loft at Ruby Falls, Wamp and others defended preservation efforts and voiced strong opposition to new construction on Moccasin Bend. No Tennessee legislators or state officials appeared at the forum, and they also have been largely tight-lipped since a state archaeological study of the site on the bend began Feb 5.

"Before I weigh in at this point, I'll wait for the study to be completed," Sen. Todd Gardenhire, R-Chattanooga, said in an email.

Another lawmaker with ties to the Cherokee was still on the fence, too.

"It plays an important part in my heart," Rep. Greg Vital, R-Harrison, said in a phone interview. "Anyone in my position would be conflicted based on the fact that I have a 30-year history of working to protect Moccasin Bend and the story of our Cherokee people and our heritage and legacy, and also I have an environmental concern. At the same time, now, I wear the hat of being a steward on behalf of the taxpayers of Tennessee to what we do with Moccasin Bend land and then also the taxpayers' need for mental health needs in Tennessee."

Vital has worked with the tribe in the past and even successfully sought out a National Register of Historic Places designation in 2022 for a portion of the Cherokee Trail of Tears on a piece of his property along state Highway 60 near the Bradley-Meigs-Hamilton county lines in Georgetown.

"Life is full of conflicts and balancing," Vital said.

Vital also wants to see what the archaeological study finds, he said.

"We do need to wait for a good archaeological study because the truth is, we have a Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute on the bend right now, so we know it's feasible," Vital said. "Is it compatible? And is it the most appropriate place? Or if there isn't another appropriate place, how do you make it semicompatible? Environmental discovery gives us a starting place."

Otherwise, House Speaker Cameron Sexton, R-Crossville, did not immediately respond to an email seeking comment, nor did Rep. Patsy Hazlewood, R-Signal Mountain, the House Finance chair, or Sen. Bo Watson, R-Hixson, the Senate Finance chair. Also, Reps. Yusuf Hakeem, D-Chattanooga, Greg Martin, R-Hamilton County, and Esther Helton-Haynes, R-East Ridge, did not immediately respond to emails seeking comment on where they stand.



Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians April 4 meeting video / Michell Hicks, principal chief of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, addresses the Band's Tribal Council on April 4 regarding a resolution opposing the proposed construction of a replacement state mental hospital on Moccasin Bend, a site where indigenous people lived for the last 15,000 years.

Archaeological study

Members of the National Park Partners group and Wamp have been dubious of how far-reaching the study will go. Completion of the study is still a ways off.

"It will likely take a few months to complete the work and produce the report," said Matthew Parriott, spokesperson for the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. "There are multiple steps to this process, and depending on the findings in each step, the completion of the study could be affected."

The firm New South Associates of Stone Mountain, Georgia, is performing the study, Parriott said. The work was not undertaken without "great respect to the history and heritage of the site as evidenced by our decision to both greatly reduce our footprint and conduct an archaeological study on the site before moving forward."

The state entered into an agreement for a study of a 7-acre site and an 8-acre site in the area of the now-abandoned Winston Building at a cost of \$258,400, according to contract documents obtained from the Department of General Services. While the study appears to be limited in scope, there are provisions in the scope of work to stop activities if a significant feature is found. The feature and findings will be mapped, and the company then will consult with the state archaeologist on the next steps. Documents also note that a known archaeological site overlaps a corner of the Winston Building property.

Archaeological surveys performed in the mid-1980s revealed burial mound complexes and intact subterranean villages. That work led to a National Historic Landmark designation for 1,000 acres of Moccasin Bend, according to Partners' historical accounts. The Landmark boundary surrounds a law enforcement firing range, Moccasin Bend Golf Club and the mental hospital properties, all tagged in the study as "nonconforming" land uses.

([READ MORE: State OKs plan for new Moccasin Bend psychiatric hospital](#))

The road so far

Extensive work has been done on the way to current survey activities on the bend, Parriott said in a follow-up email.

The Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services and the Department of General Services partnered for an extensive search of available properties around the Chattanooga area and other areas in the region, Parriott said.

"Department leadership looked at a total of 40 potential locations, including three in Bradley County, two in Marion County, one in Sequatchie County and one partially in McMinn and Monroe counties," Parriott said.

According to Parriott, decision-making factors on potential sites included:

- Distance from employees
- Time to completion
- Cost of construction
- Flood plain, topography, land/deed restrictions
- Road and utility access
- Proximity to schools, residential areas and other businesses
- Market availability

Meanwhile, Moccasin Bend's defenders contend precious history is at stake.

Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park — of which Moccasin Bend is a part — received more than 1 million visitors in 2023 — more than any other tourist attraction in the Chattanooga area, according to a news release from the Partners. The annual economic impact averaged more than \$80 million in recent years.

Suppose the mental health institute and other nonconforming uses were removed from Moccasin Bend. In that case, the group contends, conservative

estimates of 25% more visitors to a fully intact National Archeological District would generate an additional \$20 million annual economic impact for the Chattanooga region.

"The National Historic Landmark is 956 acres of land — every single acre in that 956 acres is a National Historic Landmark," local historian and archaeologist Major C.R. McCullough said at the April 11 forum. "It's not a series of spots. When we filed the National Historic Landmark nomination, the state tried to parse it so that the city and county, or whoever, could develop it piece by piece. But we insisted that the entirety of all of this is one single place inside the city limits of a major American city that was not duplicated anywhere else in the country, maybe the world."

National Park Partners Executive Director Tricia King Mims echoed McCullough's stance.

"Our position from the outset has been consistent: The state government pledged to find a more suitable location for the mental health institute, and now we are asking them to follow through on their commitment," Mims said in a statement on the forum. "The state has an opportunity to lead now. We respectfully request that they listen to the many voices in this region who are asking them to make a better decision for the future of Moccasin Bend.

"The proposed location of the new hospital is within a stone's throw of historically important Indigenous village sites and other culturally sensitive resources," Mims said. "To be clear, there is no place within the National Historic Landmark boundary that is not significant."

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