

A Study of Linking and Improving Public Sites Along the  
Sibley and Sully Historic Trails  
SB 2309

As enacted by the sixty first Legislative Assembly of North Dakota

By  
The North Dakota Parks and Recreation Department

August 27, 2010

## STUDY OF LINKING AND IMPROVING PUBLIC SITES ALONG THE SIBLEY AND SULLY HISTORIC TRAILS

The sixty-first Legislative Assembly enacted Senate Bill Number 2309 which directed the ND Parks and Recreation Department (The Department) to serve as lead agency to study and report findings of a study of the feasibility and desirability of linking and improving a series of public sites along the "Sibley/Sully Historic Trails" across the state of North Dakota.

The legislation further directed the ND Parks and Recreation Department to coordinate meetings with staff from the State Historical Society of ND, ND Game and Fish Department and the ND Tourism Department to consider components of the study and complete a report to be submitted to the Legislative Council by September 1, 2010.

The Department considered the study in 4 separate steps coordinated with the 3 other state agencies involved in the study. Step 1 was to distribute the language in the enacted bill along with testimony supplied to the legislative committees which resulted in the law. Step 2 involved meeting with the agency directors of the State Historical Society, ND Game and Fish Department, ND Tourism Department along with the Director of the ND Parks and Recreation Department. Step 3 was to consider each of these agencies observations from their areas of expertise, evaluate components of proposals submitted to the legislature, gather information from each agencies perspective based on their individual missions and perceptions on how the proposal would be implemented if aspects of it would be chosen to be follow up with. Step 4 was the production of a report evaluating potential costs of such action.

The legislation was introduced as a study of enhancement of specific historic sites, travel routes of 3 military expeditions and improving access for public

hunting. The Senator introducing the bill states the idea was based on testimony and a proposal provided to the Senator and legislative committee to enhance Sibley and Sully historic trails, by a private citizen, William Jenson. Several ideas are presented in the proposal submitted as part of testimony. They include:

- Develop bicycle/hiking trails intersecting travel routes by General's Sibley's 1863 and General Sully's 1863 and 1864 expeditions.
- Development of self guided driving tours with roadside signing along the routes taken by the military campaign.
- Proposed construction of informational kiosks at campsites and at major encounters between the Sioux and the U.S. Military.
- Proposed purchase of several thousand acres of land to protect the scenic viewshed adjacent to major battlegrounds or significant encounter areas between the native people and military expeditions and to enhance hunting and recreational opportunities.

The following is a summary of the input from agencies involved in the study with recommendations based on key components of the testimony and proposals included with the legislative study:

#### AUGMENTATION OF INTERPRETATION OF THE SIBLEY/SULLY EXPEDITIONS IN NORTH DAKOTA THROUGH INTERPRETIVE CENTER CONSTRUCTION, BIKE AND AUTO TOURS:

- OPPORTUNITIES:
  - o Provide enhancement of interpretation of the expedition
  - o Potential of increased rural tourism in North Dakota through the construction of informational kiosks near the communities of Tappen, Dawson, Steele, Killdeer (or near Killdeer) and Kulm.
  - o Upgrade existing facilities at Fort Abercrombie and Whitestone Battlefield.
  - o Subdivisions including communities/counties and state agencies can access grant funds to enhance bike/driving tours using locations near the expedition routes as justification for grant funding.

- LIABILITIES:

- Significant annual operation, maintenance, staffing costs and limited viability for visitation to interpretive centers during “off season” months. The State Historical Society has not decided how to proceed with management of these properties with limited resources already used for those existing sites.
- Strong emotions exist on the part of decedents of native people involved in the 1863/64 expeditions which will make interpretation of the event difficult to complete. Native people may have a legitimate concern about locating interpretive centers adjacent to sites which highlight battles. They would need to be brought into the development process.
- Sites such as Whitestone Hill are accessed by gravel road. Hard surfacing the road would require significant budget dollars. Maintaining the hard surface would fall onto the county taxpayers.
- Bike/auto tours may be fragmented as modern roads and routes somewhat feasible for bike travel often are only near expedition routes for short periods which would do little justice to what is being proposed for tour routes.

PURCHASE LANDS AROUND AND ADJACENT TO SIGNIFICANT BATTLE GROUNDS / CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT NATURAL AREAS FOR SCENIC PROTECTION AND ENHANCEMENT OF HUNTING/BIRD WATCHING OPPORTUNITIES:

- OPPORTUNITIES:

- As discussed in testimony attached to the bill, purchase of large tracks of land for conservation/scenic protection would guarantee future generations of visitors, hunters, bird watchers would be able to observe the landscape as it is seen today.
- Enhanced hunting opportunities and wildlife habitat could be secured for future generations.

- LIABILITIES:

- The proposed purchase of several thousand acres of land currently in private ownership may create a significant backlash by private landowner associations and groups.
- Creates a additional land base of public land bases agencies we need to manage for noxious weed control etc.
- Loss of tax base for local counties unless some form of payment in lieu of taxes would be established.

- Loss of farming/ranching opportunities for current or future generations. Land purchases would need to focus on purchase of native prairie and wetlands.

#### KEY FINDINGS AFTER MEETINGS WITH SHSND, NDG+FD, ND DEPT. OF TOURISM:

- The concept of enhancing the events which lead to and resulted in the Sibley/Sully Expeditions into what is now North Dakota is worth further investigation. However, proposals to purchase native prairies which are geographically linked to significant conflicts between Sioux and the U.S. military would require careful thought and feasibility studies as to the financial and social viability of each. Completing a comprehensive study of the viability of the proposal would require staff and a funding mechanism which was not provided for the legislative study. The State Historical Society of North Dakota currently studies improvements and developments at historic sites using the best professional approach at their disposal. Discussions with appropriate staff at the State Historical Society of North Dakota should take place and be ongoing to determine what would be the most appropriate manner to augment the Sibley/Sully Expeditions. At the same time, further consideration needs to take place as to the interest in the expedition by the public and if that interest would be substantial enough to justify significant influxes of state tax dollars into interpretive centers.
- Auto tours along the expedition routes identifying some camp sites etc. have been in place for several years. Updating key camp sites via the scenic byway/backway program would be a very appropriate method of highlighting the expedition's routes through ND. Books detailing the travels of the expedition in North Dakota such as "March on The Dakota's – The Sibley Expedition of 1863" by Susan Kudelka provide great insight into the background of the conflict and routes taken by the Sibley expedition. Simply providing these types of historical publications in key locations near the routes the combatants took would provide valuable historical insight into the expedition and provide the reader with a roadmap to follow each expeditions trail.
- A major component of the proposal submitted to the legislative assembly recommended purchase of large tracts of land currently held in private ownership. The brief review of the concept of large tracts

of private land purchased and held in public trust next to historic sites in ND to preserve scenic vistas, provide additional public lands for hunting, hiking, bird watching and other outdoor activities potentially will create a significant backlash by private land owners in the affected regions and likely would not be well received by political interests. While willing sellers have the opportunity to sell their land to public and conservation groups it is unlikely a large group of landowners with land adjoining each other would collectively come together to sell their land. This would limit the size of land parcels to be acquired. The ND Game and Fish Department has for several years employed a program of paying landowners to open up their private lands for hunters. The program named Private Land Open To Sportsman (PLOTS) has been successful in securing hunting opportunities for sportsman across North Dakota. While PLOTS doesn't dictate certain land management practices, the program provides landowners an option to keep lands in wildlife habitat and open them up for public access. Considering concerns in North Dakota of maintaining private ownership in lands, the PLOTS program is probably the most viable option for hunting access adjacent to the listed historic sites.

This report summarizes the study to emphasize the following:

- Preliminary investigations of the proposal which culminated with the 61<sup>st</sup> legislative assembly passing an interim study concludes that along the Sibley/Sully Expeditions.
- Auto tours of the expedition trail are partially in place. Campsite markers are located along some major highway routes where the expedition intersected these modern transportation routes or are nearby. Some camp site/expedition route markers are identified in one written. Pulling all information into one comprehensive form is something which could be completed for relatively low expense. Who would ultimately be responsible for pulling the information together is not a component of this report. Step 4 provides much of this information. Since the Sibley/Sully expedition intersects different main highways in the state, it is likely the gathering inventory of what is marked, not marked, reasonably accessible by the traveling public etc. could be shared between several agencies. Should this become a component of augmenting the Sibley/Sully trails it would not be



reasonable to expect any agency to assume the project without adequate staffing and funds to carry it out.

- The Sibley/Sully Expedition in North Dakota is representative of a much larger/socially intense story of the interaction between native people and Euro-American settlement of the west. It is at once an intriguing and extremely sensitive story in American history. It is the opinion of the Department that proposals to enhance the interpretation of this event be approached very carefully with the SHS ND as the sounding board. Combining land purchases near conflict sites for scenic buffers and hunting/outdoor activities should be considered with the landowner concerns at the forefront. Augmenting auto/bike tours of the routes taken by General's Sully and Sibley likely could be enhanced without significant budget and staff increases but, it is reasonable to expect agencies, if tapped to do any work should be afforded the budget and staff allotments to do the work correctly.

Should the legislative assembly determine more work proceed to provide more detail in studying the proposal, adequate budget dollars need to be incorporated to hold public meetings, site analysis and inventory, meetings with private landowners, Native American representatives, legislative leaderships, and NGO's community/county leadership. The proposal submitted on which the legislation was acted upon advocate's ranges from modest to very aggressive project(s). Without the type of additional study, a true determination of the merits of the proposed enhancements needs additional consideration.

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