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A patch of land near Fort Wingate, east of Gallup and a short distance from I-40, is sitting unused with existing fort buildings, constructed around 1862 to house four companies of First New Mexico volunteers. It was their job to help “control and protect” the Navajo.

However, a group of people is hoping to change that and present the fort as a piece of history.

The Old Fort Wingate Task Force wants to transfer 500 acres surrounding the old fort from the control of the Bureau of Indian Affairs to the National Park Service. Then they want to work with NPS to establish a national, state or tribal heritage site.

Members of the task force spoke with the *Sun* Feb. 4 about plans for the site, as well as its significance.

***PRESERVING THE LAND***

“I got a little concerned reading a letter from a friend of mine saying BIA had just gotten a line item in their budget to tear down and demolish all the buildings at Fort Wingate,” Task Force President Martin Link said.

Since he served with a group that put the fort barracks and several other buildings on the National Register of Historic Places in the ‘90s, Link said he started to talk with friends about their thoughts on the BIA’s actions and what they could do to stop the buildings from being torn down.

“A lot of other forts have gotten a reprieve, and it would be nice for this one to be restored and maybe tell the story about the Navajo since they lived in the area,” Link said.

Since it was established in early 2017, the task force has been striving toward that goal. So far their efforts can be credited for keeping the fort buildings standing.

The next step is to work with the bureau to transfer the land potentially to the Navajo Nation to establish a tribal park, or to the National Park Service to establish a national monument.

John Taylor, secretary for the task force, said the goal is to preserve the fort as a depiction of living history.

“[It could be] a park with multiple museums, looking at different aspects of Navajo history, military history, educational history,” Taylor said. “It would also provide an economic engine for the area.”

During the past three years, the task force has visited with local chapters including Iyanbito, Church Rock, and Bread Springs. Taylor said each of those chapters have been supportive of their plans for the old fort.

“It would bring people off the interstate. There could be youth activities,” Taylor said. “It is just a gem waiting to be polished.”

***INCENTIVES TO PRESERVE***

Taylor said the task force met with representatives of the Navajo Nation President’s office, Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department, and BIA facilities Feb. 4 to discuss goals for the fort.

“We are very encouraged by how it has been going so far, but there’s a lot more that needs to be done,” Taylor said. “We look forward to getting the public involved and seeing what a highly valuable resource Fort Wingate can be.”

Phillip Marquez, second vice chairman of the task force, spoke about a national monument at Fort Pulaski in Georgia and how it could serve as a template for what Fort Wingate can provide to the local community.

“It pulls in about $3 million a year in revenue,” Marquez said. “It provides a lot of employment for the area’s population. [Fort Wingate] could make a lot of money and it would [teach visitors about] people like the Navajo Code Talkers.”

Other people who could be highlighted by the museum at Fort Wingate include two Navajo women named Mexicana Chiquita and Muchacha, who were mustered into the army at Fort

Wingate in 1886. They were the earliest women to be mustered into the U.S. military in a combat role, according to Marquez.

Marquez spoke of other historic figures who either lived or worked at Fort Wingate, including Chief Manuelito and Manuel Antonio Chavez, the first lieutenant colonel to serve at the fort in 1861. Other names include John Joseph Pershing, George Smith Patton Jr., and Douglas McArthur, each of whom served in commanding roles in either World War I or World War II.

Allen Tom, task force member, spoke about growing up close to the fort site. His history of growing up in the area and experience in the Boy Scouts and Eagle Scouts contributed to his involvement with the task force.

“I’ve been out to Russia, Japan, Korea, Philippines, and some other places representing New Mexico,” Tom said. “The Eagle Scouts select one or two [members] from each state. I enjoyed every bit of it.”

Tom hopes the land can be preserved as a national park to commemorate these people and their experiences.

***WHAT NOW?***

The task force has the support of the Gallup City Council, who voted to adopt a resolution supporting the land at Fort Wingate with the express designation as a national monument last December.

The biggest issue standing in the way now is funding, Marquez said. He added it would likely be a combination of federal funds, tribal funds, non-profits, and grants to cover the costs of their plans for any construction.

The task force hopes to gain the support of Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez next, and then the plans can really be set in motion, Marquez said.

“Once the Navajo Nation gets possession of [the land], it can be theirs to use for historic preservation,” he said. “We dreamed about it, we got support for it. Now we’re ready to make it a reality.”

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