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# Petition opposing new mental health hospital on Moccasin Bend has more than 1,000 signatures

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by [Ben Benton](#)

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Staff Photo by Ricky Young / The site of the Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute is seen from Point Park in November. Officials plan to rebuild the main campus of the facility, foreground, at the location of the Winston Building, located in a smaller clearing in the trees, at left.

The \$260 million replacement mental health facility project on Moccasin Bend has at least 1,000 opponents who have signed a petition that contends construction of the facility would irreparably damage the history-rich site for generations.

Jim Johnson, who started the petition, cited the same reasons Moccasin Bend was selected for the first national archaeological district in the U.S. as why the state should not use the site for a replacement for the Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute, which has called Moccasin Bend home since 1961.

Johnson is a 23-year Chattanooga resident from New England who owned a bicycle tour company here for 20 of those years. The petition Tuesday had 1,055

signatures.

"Native Americans have been living there for 12,000 years," Johnson said by phone. "It's part of the Trail of Tears, part of the Underground Railroad, played a role in the 1863 Civil War battles for Chattanooga. All those things led to 1986, when Moccasin Bend received a designation as a National Historic Landmark and that was a precursor to — in 2003 — Congress approved the creation of the 768-acre Moccasin Bend National Archaeological District as part of the Chickamauga-Chattanooga National Military Park."

(READ MORE: Chattanooga conservationists, health advocates puzzled by Moccasin Bend plan)

When the district was created, part of the agreement was the state would retain ownership of the 86 acres of land that houses the hospital, but Johnson said his understanding of the intent at the time was to return the property to the archaeological district once the hospital facility lived out its functional life.

"That's been the understanding forever," Johnson said.

Not only does history stand to suffer, the proposed replacement facility on 13 acres currently occupied by the old hospital's Winston Building would have to fit more capacity into a much taller structure that would dominate the view of Moccasin Bend's landscape from every angle, Johnson said.

In September, the Tennessee Building Commission gave the project the go-ahead and approved proceeding with the selection of a designer. But in a surprise move, state Mental Health and Substance Abuse Commissioner Marie Williams announced during her presentation to the commission that the state will first have an archaeological survey done on the site.

"If the survey is acceptable, then we will proceed with the razing of the Winston Building and construct the replacement hospital and parking garage on that site," Williams said in September.

State Archaeologist Phil Hodge said the first steps of the survey are just ahead.

"They have not started yet, but will be starting soon," Hodge said by phone.

During the Building Commission meeting in September, members of the conservation-oriented group National Park Partners said the state could become embroiled in a "no-win confrontation" with Native American tribes over religious matters that could result in costly, time-consuming lawsuits.

The new hospital was in Gov. Bill Lee's plan presented in November 2021 calling for a replacement facility that would boost beds from 165 to 200 and increase space for conducting assessments. Moccasin Bend is state government's only East Tennessee regional facility and serves 52 counties. The state has three other mental health institutes, located in Nashville, Bolivar and Memphis. A fifth institute based in Knoxville closed in 2012.

No one disputes the need for a replacement mental health facility, said Johnson, who was instrumental in the preservation of property on Stringer's Ridge and worked as an adviser to western Balkan nations for the U.S. Department of State on how to use bicycle tourism in a stable economy.

It's the location that is drawing fire, he said, and leaders should seek alternative sites to prevent the potential negative effect on the preservation of Native American relics, artifacts, ancient villages and interpretation of Moccasin Bend's spiritual and cultural history.

Johnson believes adequate property for a new regional facility can be found elsewhere, and site selection should reflect more stakeholders' voices.

(READ MORE: As Tennessee begins Moccasin Bend archaeology study, park supporters say key stakeholders left out)

Petition signers are of like mind.

"There are plenty of good sites around Chattanooga that won't impact a critical archaeological site," petition signer Topher Kersting said in a post on the change.org page. "There's no good reason to keep the hospital there."

A signer from Texas pitched her support behind protecting Moccasin Bend and said patients stand to benefit from a different site.

"The land is sacred and needs protection," Gillian Harris said in her post. "The patients will benefit from better facilities closer to the hospital."

Moccasin Bend has far more potential as a national destination, especially when the city is already seeking a designation as a "National Park City" and has been a destination for Civil War history for more than 130 years, Johnson said. According to city government information on the effort, Chattanooga is at step four of the 10-step process to become a National Park City, so named by the National Park City Foundation.

The first glimpse of Chattanooga for incoming visitors shouldn't be a sterile, government building, Johnson said, but a snapshot taking in the thousands of years of human habitation that made it what it is. The petition will be sent to 13 Tennessee lawmakers and interested parties.

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