

Lawrence City Commission to consider adopting resolution committing to unconditional return of sacred prayer rock to Kaw Nation



photo by: Kim Callahan/Journal-World

The Shunganunga boulder, pictured Wednesday, Dec. 9, 2020, is a 23-ton red quartzite rock that sits in Robinson Park in downtown Lawrence across from City Hall. In 1929, a group of Lawrence officials

arranged to take the boulder from the Shunganunga Creek near Tecumseh, where the creek joins with the Kansas River — a site that was sacred to the Kanza tribe.

City leaders will soon consider making an official commitment to return a sacred prayer rock to the Kaw Nation and to issue a formal apology for its removal from the tribe's homeland decades ago.

As part of its meeting Tuesday, the Lawrence City Commission will consider adopting a joint resolution with Douglas County to offer a formal apology to the people of the Kaw Nation for the appropriation of the sacred rock, In'zhúje'waxóbe, and agreeing to its unconditional return to the Kaw Nation.

As it has been for more than 90 years, the 23-ton red quartzite boulder is currently in Robinson Park across from City Hall, 6 E. Sixth St. In 1929, a group of Lawrence officials and community members arranged to take the boulder from its longtime resting place along the Shunganunga Creek, according to newspaper archives reviewed by the Journal-World. The boulder was then fitted with a plaque and made into a monument honoring settlers who founded the city and placed in the park, which is owned by the county.

Tuesday's proposed action is in response to a formal request for the rock's return that the Kaw Nation issued at the end of November. A letter from Kaw Nation Chairwoman Lynn Williams informed the commission that at the Kaw Nation General Council meeting in October, Kaw citizens overwhelmingly voted in favor of bringing In'zhúje'waxóbe, also known as the "Big Red Rock," back to the tribe, as the Journal-World previously reported. Williams says in the letter that the tribe's stewardship of the rock and its significance as a spiritual item of prayer was well documented, and that the tribe's intent was to reclaim that stewardship and restore the rock's sacred significance.

Following receipt of the letter, the commission voted in January to move forward with the tribe's request to return the boulder and to issue a formal apology for taking and defacing it. The proposed resolution apologizes for the city's past actions and commits to the unconditional return of the boulder.

More specifically, the resolution states that in 1929, residents of Lawrence, with an apparent lack of consideration of In'zhúje'waxóbe's significance to the Kaw Nation, appropriated the boulder from its location on the south bank of the Kansas River, near Topeka, and transported it to the city for installation as a city monument. The resolution states that in addition to appropriating the boulder, the

residents defaced it by affixing a plaque dedicated to the white settlers who founded the city 75 years earlier in 1854.

The resolution goes on to say that the governing bodies of both the city and county desire to offer an apology to the people of the Kaw Nation on behalf of Lawrence and Douglas County and to state clearly their intention to return In 'zhúje' waxóbe to the Kaw Nation, without conditions, and to work with the Kaw Nation to develop and foster a new relationship built on respect, goodwill and cooperation. The city and county further express regret for the history of violence, maltreatment, neglect and pernicious policies of the U.S. government and other units of government directed at the Kaw Nation and other native peoples through U.S. history.

A city staff memo to the commission states that an assessment of the condition of In 'zhúje' waxóbe is necessary to ensure its move does not damage or destabilize it. Jay Johnson, a geography and atmospheric science professor, is communicating with the University of Kansas Geology Department to find out whether it wishes to partner with the city on the work, but if that is not possible the city will work to hire a suitable consultant. Johnson is also working with KU to identify a lead person or entity to assist with grant applications.

The City Commission will convene virtually for its regular meeting at 5:45 p.m. Tuesday with limited staff in place at City Hall, 6 E. Sixth St. The city has asked that residents participate in the meeting virtually if they are able to do so. A link to register for the Zoom meeting and directions to submit written public comment are included in the agenda that is available on the [city's website](https://www2.ljworld.com/news/2021/mar/12/lawrence-city-commission-to-consider-adopting-resolution-committing-to-unconditional-return-of-sacred-p...), [lawrenceks.org](https://www2.ljworld.com/news/2021/mar/12/lawrence-city-commission-to-consider-adopting-resolution-committing-to-unconditional-return-of-sacred-p...).