

# **Lawrence City Commission votes to return 23-ton sacred prayer rock to Kaw Nation, apologize to tribe for city's past actions**



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.

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Decades after the City of Lawrence removed a sacred prayer rock from the Kaw Nation's homelands and made it into a monument honoring settlers, city leaders will begin working to return the rock and issue a formal apology to the tribe.

As part of its meeting Tuesday, the Lawrence City Commission voted 5-0 to move forward with a request from the Kaw Nation to return the 23-ton red quartzite boulder, which is currently in Robinson Park across from City Hall, 6. E. Sixth St. The city will now formally respond to the request and express its intent to work with the tribe and other community partners to seek grants to pay for the relocation of the rock and develop plans for its return to the tribe.

"I think this is certainly something we are going to keep pushing forward on, and do all we can to right the wrongs of the past, and do it in the best way possible in collaboration with the Kaw Nation," Mayor Brad Finkeldei said.

In a letter to the city, Kaw Nation Chairwoman Lynn Williams wrote 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.

#### **Previous coverage**

- *Dec. 9 — **Kaw Nation asks for return of sacred prayer rock that was taken and converted into monument to settlers***

Kaw Nation Vice Chairman James Pepper Henry, one of the Kaw citizens designated to represent the tribe in the matter, told the commission Tuesday that In 'zhúje 'waxóbe could be translated as "a sacred item," and that the tribe was looking forward to working with the city to get the rock returned.

"We are very grateful that the city is considering our request, and once we receive formal communication from the mayor's office we would like to continue the conversation about the rock," Henry said.

As part of the process, commissioners said they also wanted to issue an apology for the city's past actions. In 1929, a group of Lawrence officials and community members arranged to take the rock from its longtime resting place along the Shunganunga Creek, according to newspaper archives reviewed by the Journal-World. The rock was then fitted with a plaque and made into a monument honoring the city's founders.

Vice Mayor Courtney Shipley said that with the addition of the plaque, the rock was defaced, not just stolen from the tribe. Shipley proposed, and other commissioners agreed, that the city should issue a formal apology to the tribe as part of the process to return the rock. Commissioner Jennifer Ananda added that she thought the city would have to be very intentional about the apology.

"Because 'I'm sorry' doesn't cut it in this instance," Ananda said. "And so how do we really develop those relationships in a way that is indicative of the magnitude, and the understanding of the magnitude, of what this community did with that project?"

The letter from Williams states that the tribe's intent is to bring the rock to Allegawaho Memorial Heritage Park in Council Grove, which is owned and maintained by the Kaw Nation, as part of a long-term goal to develop the site into an educational resource for all Kansans and visitors to learn about the state's original inhabitants.

The city received various letters from Lawrence residents in support of returning the rock, and City Attorney Toni Wheeler told the commission that there might be grant funds or community donations that could cover a portion or all of the costs of relocation.

The land the boulder sits on, Robinson Park, is owned by Douglas County, and city staff said in a memo to the commission that preliminary discussions with County Administrator Sarah Plinsky about relocating the rock had been positive. The memo said that Plinsky had indicated that the newly seated County Commission would be willing to discuss the matter. At Tuesday's meeting, Wheeler said city staff would prepare a joint resolution with the County Commission stating the intention to relinquish the rock to the Kaw Nation and to work collaboratively on the project.

In other business, the commission voted 5-0 to approve a priority-based budgeting scoring matrix, which will identify spending priorities by scoring city

programs based on how well they align with the commission's new strategic plan. For scoring purposes, the most heavily weighted aspects of the plan are its five goals or outcomes, which include a welcoming and vibrant community; safe and functional neighborhoods; trusted public and community-based safety; economic security and a sustainable local economy; and well-maintained, functional and efficient infrastructure.

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