

## Lawrence City Commission to consider request from Kaw Nation to return sacred prayer rock



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 a request from the Kaw Nation to return a sacred prayer rock that was removed from the tribe's homelands decades ago and made into a monument honoring settlers, including potential ways to fund the rock's relocation.

As part of its meeting Tuesday, the Lawrence City Commission will discuss a letter received from the Kaw Nation requesting return of the Big Red Rock, which is currently in Robinson Park across from City Hall, 6. E. Sixth St. City staff will present potential options to the commission, and ask for the commission's direction regarding how to proceed.

Kaw Nation Chairwoman Lynn Williams recently sent a letter to the city stating that Kaw citizens overwhelmingly voted in favor of returning In 'zhúje 'waxóbe, or the "Big Red Rock," to the tribe at the Kaw Nation General Council meeting in October, *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 is well documented, and the tribe's intent is to reclaim that stewardship and restore the rock's sacred significance.

The letter states that the tribe's intent is to bring the rock to Allegawaho Memorial Heritage Park in Council Grove as part of a long-range goal to develop the site into an educational resource for all Kansans and visitors to learn about the state's original inhabitants. The park is owned and maintained by the Kaw Nation and is open to the public, and the rock will join other monuments of historical significance to the Kaw people and the citizens of Kansas.

A memo to the commission states that community members have expressed support for the Kaw Nation's request, and the city has even received correspondence from the community offering to assist the city with time and funds to support the return of the Big Red Rock.

There is no estimate currently on how much it would cost to relocate the rock, which is estimated to weigh 23 tons and was moved to Lawrence with the help of a crane and railcar in 1929. The memo states that there may be grant funds or community donations that could cover a portion of all of the costs of relocation.

If approved by the commission, the city could assist in the Kaw Nation's application for a grant by writing a letter of support, or if appropriate, by joining in a grant application with the tribe or other partners, according to the memo.

Potential next steps include authorizing the mayor to send a formal written response to the Kaw Nation expressing intent to work with the tribe and other community partners to relocate the rock.

Other steps could be directing staff to prepare a joint resolution with the county commission regarding the intention to relinquish the rock and to continue work with Kaw Nation representatives and other community partners to explore grant opportunities and plans for moving the rock.

The letter from Williams notes that after the Kaw people, also known as the Kanza, were removed from Kansas to what is now Oklahoma in 1873, they no longer had access to the rock at its original location near the confluence of the Kansas River and Shunganunga Creek. The letter states white settlers understood the ceremonial significance and sacred nature of the rock to the Kaw people, and ignoring that, descendants of those settlers appropriated the rock and rededicated it.

The rock is a city monument honoring the founding of Lawrence, but it sits on Douglas County property, which has previously made it unclear which entity technically is in charge of the rock.

The memo states that the City Attorney's Office researched the topic and identified no legal barriers to the city's ability to return the rock to the Kaw Nation. The memo states that preliminary discussions with County Administrator Sarah Plinsky have been positive, and Plinsky indicated the newly seated board of county commissioners would be willing to discuss the matter.

The City Commission will convene virtually 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, [lawrenceks.org](http://lawrenceks.org).