



Foes of Institute housing cite Park Service report on battlefield

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By Nick Norlen, Staff Writer

A current National Park Service report to congress labeling the Princeton Battlefield National Historic Landmark as “threatened” is now being touted by a local preservation group as further evidence that no development should take place on land that they consider part of the battlefield.

Over the last several months, the Princeton Battlefield Society, a nonprofit group dedicated to the preservation of the site, has been actively opposing the Institute for Advanced Study’s plans to build 15 faculty homes on eight acres of Institute-owned land near Princeton Battlefield State Park.

Even though the tract slated for development is not within the park’s official boundaries, members of the society have said archaeological findings at the proposed housing site indicate that it was a significant part of the 1777 Battle of Princeton — which they describe as a turning point in the Revolutionary War.

However, Institute representatives have said the findings — which are detailed in a report commissioned by the Institute — are not evidence of significant activity on the proposed building site.

In late December, the National Park Service sent a letter to the Battlefield Society noting that the battlefield National Historic Landmark has been labeled as threatened since 2004 “because of two proposals that would result in incompatible new construction: first, the visual intrusion that would result from the construction of 15 dwelling units on the edge of the state park proposed by the Institute for Advanced Study, and second, soccer fields and associated parking proposed by Princeton Township.”

The letter was authored by Bill Brookover, an historical architect for the Northeast Regional Office of the National Park Service, who said he has been closely following the Institute’s plans since they first appeared before the Regional Planning Board of Princeton in 2003.

His letter also supports the society’s claim that the tract proposed for development by the

Institute was part of the battlefield by stating that the battle area “extends considerably beyond the state park’s boundaries and includes the areas where these two projects are proposed.”

Moreover, the letter notes that a recent Congress-commissioned study on the nation’s battlefields identified the Princeton Battlefield as one of the “Priority I Principal Sites, which are the most historically significant and most endangered Revolutionary War Battlefields in the nation.”

As far as the township’s proposed soccer fields, Princeton Recreation Department Executive Director Jack Roberts said those plans have likely been “tabled indefinitely” because of prohibitive costs and other hurdles.

”We have put it on a very distant table as something that is probably not going to become a reality,” he said.

Regardless, the Battlefield Society’s efforts have been focused on the proposed Institute housing.

Anne Weber, the member of the society’s board of trustees to whom the letter was addressed, said the designations are an important boost to her group’s cause.

”It’s certainly tremendous to have the National Park Service recognize this site as one of the most significant and one of the most threatened,” she said.

Ms. Weber also noted that the group recently nominated the battlefield to the National Trust for Historic Preservation as one of the nation’s 11 most endangered historic sites — an annual list expected to be announced in May.

However, she acknowledged that that designation — and those noted in the National Park Service letter — really have no teeth.

”They have none whatsoever,” she said. “It’s raising awareness, it’s publicity. That’s it — to really get more of the general public or the community aware and concerned.”

Mr. Brookover said the same of the labels mentioned in his letter.

”Theoretically, Congress could do something,” he said. “But in reality, this kind of reporting is kind of making the stewards aware that there are these issues — in hoping that there will be some resolution.”

Still, Ms. Weber said she hopes the publicity puts pressure on the Institute “to perhaps think about a different location, to think about additional ways to mitigate the impact on the battlefield and on the National Historic Landmark.”

However, Institute spokeswoman Christine Ferrara said in an e-mail Thursday that “once the Institute receives the necessary approvals, it will move forward with its plans.”

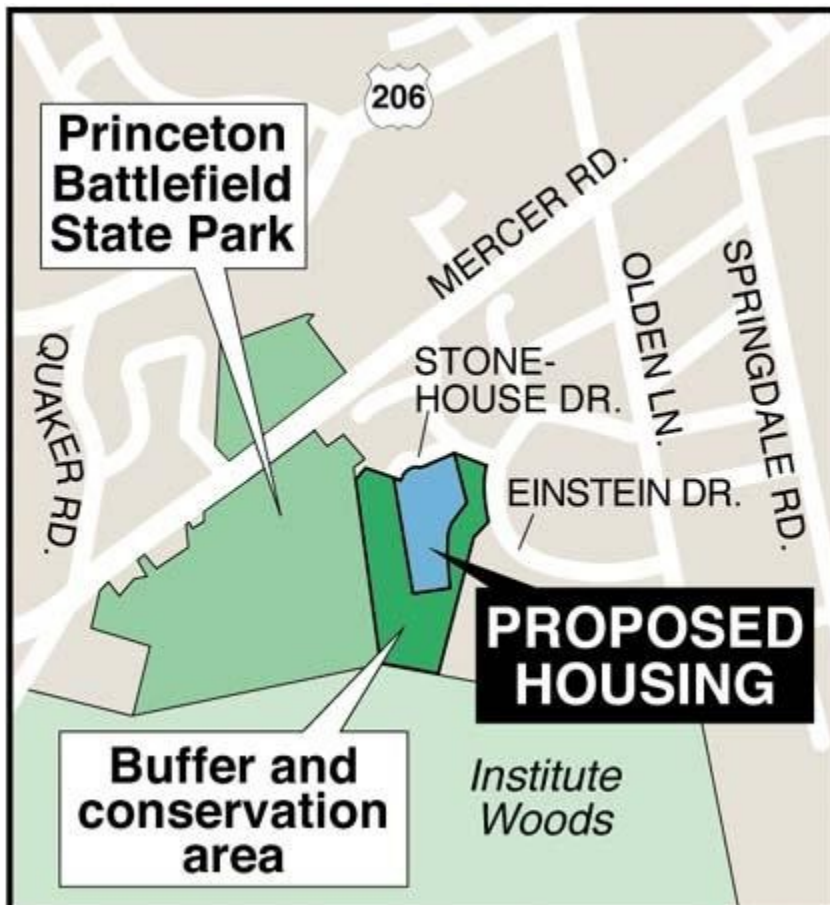
She added, “The Institute is waiting for the DEP and the State Historic Preservation Office to complete their review.”

The Institute’s housing concept started with its donation of 32 acres to the state, thus increasing the size of the battlefield by 60 percent.

Since then, the Institute has also agreed to include a buffer to separate the housing from the battlefield’s border and to forego development rights on another 10 acres that it owns.

State Assemblyman Reed Gusciora (D-Princeton), who provided the National Park Service letter to The Packet, and who has been an advocate of the site’s preservation, acknowledged the Institute’s concessions.

”I can understand their position,” he said. “They’re the ones that gave up the original battlefield lands. They also helped preserve the Institute Woods. We have to applaud those efforts, but at the same time, we’d like to save the last remaining battlefield lands and accommodate the Institute as well. And that’s going to be a challenge, because they feel they’re in need of faculty housing. I just think that’s too big of a price to pay.”



Map shows site proposed for new Institute for Advanced Study housing.

Graphic by Tom Lederer



Members of the Princeton Battlefield Society, from left, are Jerry Hurwitz, president; Robert Rosetta, vice president; and Kip Cherry and Bill Spadea.

Staff photo by Mark Czajkowski