



July 13, 2023

Clay County Planning Commission

211 West Main St.

Vermillion, SD 57069

Dear Commission Members:

The purpose of this letter is to request appropriate county zoning to reasonably protect the nearby setting and viewscape of the Spirit Mound Historic Prairie. We believe this can be done without inhibiting the development of industrial solar projects or harming the overall economic development opportunities of Clay County.

Spirit Mound Historic Prairie is a 320 acre, unique Lewis and Clark site and restored tallgrass prairie that is owned and managed by the Parks Division of South Dakota Game, Fish & Parks (SD GF&P), as well as a designated part of the Missouri National Recreational River. Spirit Mound is also a spur route on the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail, also administered by the National Park Service (NPS). The NPS does occasional programming at the Mound and maintains interpretive signs at the site. Thus, Spirit Mound is under the purview of the State, the NPS office in Yankton, and the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail headquartered in Omaha, NE. Spirit Mound is on the National Register of Historic Places. The Spirit Mound Summit Trail is also designated as a National Recreation Trail.

Spirit Mound may be the most important historic site in east-river South Dakota. It is a trifecta of cultural, historic, and environmental significance: first, as a marker of Native American spirituality, second as one of the only known exact spots where the Captains Lewis and Clark stood during their expedition, and finally as a restored tallgrass prairie habitat. It is also a major attraction to visitors as well as a regular destination for star parties, looking for dark nighttime skies.

For Native Americans Spirit Mound remains a sacred site where they sometimes go to offer prayers. Their regard for the Mound is shown by the tobacco ties they still leave there.

On August 25, 1804, Lewis and Clark took eleven men on a hot, humid day away from the river to explore the Mound. Lewis and Clark visited Spirit Mound because they had heard stories about little spirit people at the site from Native American people they had met downriver on their journey from Omaha.

The significance of the view from the top of the hill cannot be overstated. William Clark wrote an extended narrative about the day in his journal:

... from the top of the Mound we beheld a most beautiful landscape. [The first buffalo herds that they'd seen.] ... from the top of this Mound we observed several large gangs of Buffalo & Elk feeding upwards of 800 in number.

They knew the Yankton Dakota were camped on the *River Jacques*, where trees were slightly visible on the western horizon. How excited these men must have been, standing on an eminence, finally away from the river that they'd been pulling their boats up for three months, as they thought of the journey that lay ahead. The wildlife and grasslands must have been stunning and inspiring from the vantage point of the Mound. Soon they would meet directly with the Yankton Dakota and, within the future state of South Dakota's boundaries, also with Lakota and Arikara nations, to represent and suggest new trade relationships with the United States.

National Park Service staff from the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail and the Missouri National Recreational River recently completed visual resource inventories for three locations at Spirit Mound. The following discussion of that effort and its significance was provided by the NPS:

The NPS, with Argonne National Laboratory, developed the visual resources inventory (VRI) to improve understanding of scenery and help address changes in scenic landscapes. Scenic views inspire people and connect them to nature and history, so much so, that the 1916 NPS Organic Act specified scenery as one of our most significant values for parks to protect. Some of the nation's most spectacular and historically significant landscapes are entrusted to the NPS and many of the landscapes in and around parks are at risk. The VRI has been in use by the NPS since 2014 and over 30 parks have used inventories for planning and management activities. The VRI identifies two distinct, equal values of a view: its scenic or aesthetic quality and its importance to the park purpose and visitor experience. With this method, historic and/or culturally significant views can rate as high as scenic ones. Views are considered in park and regional context, meaning the process does not compare parks to one another. The NPS inventory provides framework and vocabulary to document and analyze scenic views consistently. When approached in this way, scenic views can be measured, managed, and ultimately protected. The NPS assessed three separate viewpoints at the Mound this spring: the view from the trailhead kiosk, the view north from the summit, and the view south from the summit. In their analyses, the views at Spirit Mound rate high due to a number of factors including: high potential historic site (Lewis and Clark Expedition, Tribal cultural significance, National Register of Historic Sites), great views with only minor undesirable features like power lines or communication towers which do not dominate the view, patchwork of agricultural lands but no significant development otherwise, heavily promoted views in media/tourist information, heavily visited site with multiple sources directing visitors to location, views reinforce the interpretive theme of the individuals of the past being able to view the surrounding area from the top of Spirit Mound. Should any significant development be located within these current scenic views, the ratings for the area would surely decrease which could affect visitation and appreciation for the area and its rich cultural and natural history.

Spirit Mound Trust provides a notebook for visitors to record comments at the summit of the Mound. In our notebooks from the past few years, the view has been praised dozens of times. Below are just a few examples of what people have written about the view (and more are provided on the final page of this letter).

- This is such a beautiful view! So glad I got to do this while visiting family. It's such a unique experience standing where they stood!
- Standing here at 9:30am imagining what the native people as well as Lewis and Clark saw and thought on being here. Very spiritual for me.
- I work on the 51st floor of the Empire State Building in New York City. But I'm a Midwest girl at heart. This view beats all of them.

Vermillion lies on the western edge of the historic range of the tallgrass prairie, one of the most comprehensively destroyed habitats in the United States. For twenty years SD GF&P and Spirit Mound Trust have been working to restore that habitat. Visitors can watch the prairie change with the seasons; bird migrations are watched and studied every year; and often the fall movement of monarch butterflies is stunning at the Mound.

Spirit Mound has become the graphic symbol of Vermillion and Clay County. It graces the Sheriff's Department shoulder patches and the county website background. It is also included in the mural at the Lewis and Clark water system treatment plant and the mural and accompanying display in the W. H. Over Museum. The print of Lewis and Clark reaching the summit greets visitors in the lobby of at least one Vermillion motel.

It is frequently mentioned in news stories and articles that promote our area. Recent examples are the April South Dakota Public Broadcasting Magazine's cover story *Iconic Images of South Dakota* and the Smithsonian Magazine's inclusion of Vermillion in their *15 Best Small Towns to Visit* online article.

Visitation counts at the Mound continue to grow. There were over 25,000 visitors in 2022, up 40 percent from the previous year. This was a greater increase than for any other park in SD GF&P District Eight. The total number of visitors to Spirit Mound exceeds visitors to Union Grove State Park and is not far behind Adams Nature Center located in the Sioux City metropolitan area.

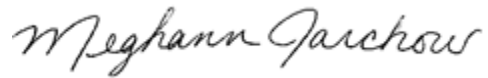
Given all of the above, we respectfully request that county zoning create a two-mile setback from the boundaries of Spirit Mound Historic Prairie from all above-ground commercial development, including, but not limited to, solar projects.

This setback would not inhibit potential economic development in the county. If Highway 19 is seen as a development corridor, it runs for about 25 miles through Clay County, and Highway 50 runs about 17 miles.

Senator Tim Johnson presented a symbolic check for purchase of Spirit Mound, during a ceremony at the summit July 29, 2001. One of his comments that day was "People are not

remembered only for what they build, but what they save as well.” We hope that this will also apply to all of us, 22 years later.

Respectfully submitted by the Spirit Mound Trust Board,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Meghann Jarchow".

Meghann Jarchow

President, Spirit Mound Trust Board of Directors

cc: Drew Gunderson, Planning & Zoning Administrator, Clay County

Clay County Commissioners

Curt Dimmick, Superintendent, National Park Service

Tim Schreiner, Chair, Clay County Historical Preservation Commission

Jason Baumann, District Park Supervisor, South Dakota Game, Fish & Parks

Example Comments Written about the Spirit Mound View in the Visitor Notebook

- Beautiful. You see many animals on your way up. You see miles and miles away. The beauty of South Dakota lies here.
- I enjoy sitting and looking down at the tiny world. Coming here tonight was a good idea. The sunsets prettily. The lights of the houses sparkle brighter at night. I love the world around me.
- Looking out I think of all the wild places we have lost and I treasure these few places left to us.
- So quiet and peaceful, could stay up here all day. 😊 Can see for miles around. Love the beautiful prairie grass and wild flowers. (heart) Nothing like it.
- Immensely beautiful location. Enjoy this natural masterpiece.
- It is very hot and windy today, but I am glad I came here still. I live only a few miles away and love coming here early in the morning when it is quiet, cool, and peaceful. On clear mornings you can see many miles, even to either side of the valley.
- On top of the world looking down on creation!
- It is 8:30pm, and we have the moon to our left and the sun setting to our right. How beautiful it is to witness the moon say goodnight to the sun, and the sun say good morning to the moon. Life is simple in this moment. Listening to the birds sing reminds me of how blessed I am to be a part of the universe experiencing itself. You are LOVED. So loved.