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Princeton battlefield gains influential ally

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BY ROBERT STERN

PRINCETON TOWNSHIP -- The campaign to keep new housing and soccer fields from historically venerated ground fought over in the pivotal Revolutionary War Battle of Princeton on Jan. 3, 1777, has gotten a fresh round of reinforcements -- from the National Park Service.

The federal agency last year rated the Princeton Battlefield National Historic Landmark as among "the most historically significant and most endangered" Revolutionary War battlefield in the country.

That's according to a Dec. 27 letter from National Park Service Historical Architect Bill Brookover to battlefield conservationists and New Jersey officials.

"The events that transpired on that property resulted in the birth of our nation," said Assemblyman Reed Gusciora, D-Princeton Borough, who provided The Times a copy of the Dec. 27 letter yesterday.

"We hear so many stories of major battlefields being taken over by development and here we have an opportunity to save this historically significant battlefield," Gus ciora said.

The threat designation, which does not guarantee the battlefield added safeguards from development, arises from two proposals that would lead to "incompatible new construction," according to Brookover.

One is "the visual intrusion that would result" from the Institute for Advanced Study's plan to build faculty housing for 15 families on eight of 22 gently sloping acres of farmland the institute owns next to the 85-acre Princeton Battlefield State Park.

The heralded institute that Albert Einstein called home wants to place seven single-family houses and two four-unit town house buildings in a pocket of battlefield land that was never incorporated into the state park.

The second threat comes from a township proposal to build soccer fields and related parking off Quaker Road near the historic park on land adjacent to the Clarke Farmhouse and the Stony Brook Friends Meetinghouse, according to Brookover.

Both structures are "contributing features" of the Princeton Battlefield National Historic Landmark, which encompasses 210 acres -- the state park's 85 acres and 125 acres nearby.

Princeton Recreation Director Jack Roberts said yesterday that township officials have taken a close look in the past five years at the idea of putting two soccer fields and related parking on battlefield land off Quaker Road.

But Roberts said resistance from the Princeton Historic Preservation Committee and possible difficulties in easily creating space for parking likely will deter the township from following through on the soccer fields.

As far as the National Park Service is concerned, it would be inappropriate to build either the soccer fields or the institute housing.

"The core area of the battle, which contains critical land where fighting occurred and casualties were incurred, extends considerably beyond the state park's boundaries and includes the areas where these two projects are proposed," Brookover wrote in his Dec. 27 letter.

"Incompatible new construction on the historic battlefield would diminish the integrity of the (National Historic Landmark)," he stated in the letter, which was addressed primarily to Anne Weber, a trustee of the nonprofit Princeton Battlefield Society.

"Princeton Battlefield was found to have a high degree of threat (from development) in the short term and a medium degree of threat in the long term," he wrote.

It was the fourth consecutive year that the National Park Service has tagged the Princeton Battlefield National Historic Landmark as a threatened site.

Weber said Brookover's letter is "very important just because of the prestige of the National Park Service as really the agency of the federal government that is in charge of preserving America's heritage."

The letter supports the Princeton Battlefield Society's recent nomination of the battlefield as one of the country's 11 most endangered historic sites, a designation that would come from the nonprofit National Trust for Historic Preservation, she said. The National Trust typically makes that decision in May.

Although the designation would be largely symbolic, the advantage would be to bring additional, broader publicity to the plight to preserve battlefield lands, she said.

Similarly, Weber hopes the National Park Service's voice will help persuade the Institute for Advanced Study to find another way to fulfill its housing needs.

A spokeswoman for the institute said it is not ready to proceed with a public review of its plans at the planning board level.

"The institute is continuing to work with the appropriate oversight agencies to advance our plans for the faculty housing project," spokeswoman Christine Ferrara wrote in an e-mail.

Contact Robert Stern at rstern@njtimes.com or (609) 989-5731.