

Indian-run school among proposals for Fort Snelling Upper Post redevelopment include

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This week, the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) released the names of five organizations that submitted proposals for all or part of the land.

To American Indians, the land is known as the Upper Bluff. The government calls it Fort Snelling's Upper Post.

By either name, the land where the slave Dred Scott walked is thick with this country's history, including that of Dakota and Ojibwe Indians.

Now the 4 million square feet of land and its shuttered yellow-brick buildings provide a major development opportunity near the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, the Hiawatha light-rail line and major Twin Cities freeways. The area parcel is roughly the size of the Mall of America.

This week, the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) released the names of five organizations that submitted proposals for all or part of the land. Only the names of the applicants are public for now, but a couple of them spoke about their ideas Friday.

The American Indian Community Development Corp. proposes turning two buildings into a K-12 charter school and an outpost of the Leech Lake Tribal College based in Cass Lake, Minn. The charter school, which hopes to open in 2014, would offer cultural and language immersion for some 300 students, said Roxanne Gould, co-chair of the charter school's board. The year-round school would be named Bdote, a Dakota word referring to the convergence of rivers, in this case the Mississippi and the Minnesota.

"The Dakota people had always hoped that land would be returned to them," Gould said.

Archie Givens, CEO of Legacy Management and Development Corp., said he would welcome the school into his proposal to redevelop the entire parcel for a multitude of uses, including an embassy for all the state's Indian tribes, a museum, monuments, transitional housing and a historic commemoration of Scott.

"The vision is to create a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Givens said. "It's an opportunity to bring to light all that history and be a coming together for all of Minnesota."

The other three entities submitting applications for redevelopment of the land didn't respond to phone calls Friday. They include AirSpace Minnesota, Upper Mississippi Development LLC and Global Athlete Village.

For site, 'time is short'

The Upper Post is a cousin to historic Fort Snelling, which was restored in 1970 and has become a major attraction. In the early to mid-1800s, Fort Snelling was the hub of government on the Upper Mississippi. During the Civil War, thousands of Union volunteers trained at Fort Snelling, and many of them later helped to hold the line at Gettysburg.

Dred Scott lived with his master, an Army surgeon, for three years at Fort Snelling, a free territory. Givens said it's not well-known that Scott served as his master's surgical assistant. Scott was the plaintiff in the notorious 1857 U.S. Supreme Court decision that found no authority for the federal government to regulate slavery.

The unincorporated Upper Post site is operated under an unusual joint-powers agreement among the state DNR, Hennepin County, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, the National Park Service's Mississippi National River and Recreation Area and the Minnesota Historical Society. Representatives from those groups will review the proposals and make a recommendation to DNR Commissioner Tom Landwehr, possibly by the end of the month.

Larry Peterson, Upper Post project manager, said Landwehr will then select at least one proposal for further negotiations. The private developer would be expected to fund the restoration-rehabilitation, then lease the land from the state.

Ultimately, the state's Executive Council will be asked to sign off on the pact. The council includes the governor, lieutenant governor, auditor, secretary of state and attorney general.

The site's many historic buildings were recently shuttered and shored up with state bonding money to fend off degradation, but time is short. "We want to keep it moving," Peterson said of the project. "This is a national historic landmark with historic buildings that have been vacant for a long time."

Hennepin County Commissioner Peter McLaughlin is pushing the project and a request for bonding money to begin work on the necessary sewer, water and road improvements. "When you're in elected office, you have responsibilities for the historic treasures," he said.

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