

An Open Letter to the Director of Indiana State Parks:

Dear Mr. Baughman:

We understand that you are relatively new to your position as the Director of Indiana State Parks. Indiana's parks have a long history and honored heritage that welcomes visitors to immerse themselves in these natural and historic public offerings.



I am writing today to help you understand the significance of the pending loss of an iconic part of the community's heritage at Potato Creek State Park near North Liberty, IN. The park, which was dedicated in 1977 as a state recreation area, required the purchase of private properties, many of them farms. One of the properties, owned by the Naragon family, included a large red barn that was built for use in the family's farming operation. The significance of the barn was noted in a book about the history of the area written by one of the descendants who lived on the land that is now the park: *"The iconic Naragon's barn is one of the few remaining landmarks of the farming community once located inside the property of Potato Creek State Park. The barn, which was built by Charles Naragon in 1908, sits at the edge of Lake Worster. It stands as a quiet testament to the hardworking farmers who tilled the soil for generations before the creation of the state-owned park."* (Franklin N. Sheneman II in Images of Modern America: Southern St. Joseph County). This barn has been an integral part of the park's landscape, telling the story of how the land was converted from farmland to parkland for the benefit of untold numbers of visitors.

On Saturday, September 27, the Friends of Potato Creek State Park heard that this iconic structure, which has been incorporated into the group's logo, was slated for demolition sometime this fall. We were informed that the structure was no longer safe and the costs to renovate would be prohibitive. We understand that you were just recently appointed to this position so may not be fully aware of this situation. Todd Zeiger, Director of Indiana Landmarks North Regional office, suggested that we contact you about this since the State of Indiana just received Indiana Landmarks' Renaissance Award for your "extraordinary commitment to preserving the 1939 inn at Spring Mill State Park."



The Friends of Potato Creek State Park was formed over 20 years ago by park enthusiasts, some of them former park employees, who wanted to promote the park to the public, volunteer to assist with park projects and activities, and provide financial assistance through fund raisers and grant applications as a not-for-profit organization. Besides volunteer time spent and funds raised to assist the park when state funds were insufficient for supplies or projects, the Friends group has sponsored numerous family activities to encourage people to visit the park.

One would think that this working partnership should have prompted early notice of any concerns about the Naragon barn (Red Barn) to the Friends group so that we could have been engaged in a discussion about the fate of the barn. Obviously, this didn't happen. For such an iconic structure in the park that displays the past heritage of the area to be summarily dismissed as an eyesore is disrespectful to the local community (descendants of the original owners still live in the area; the Naragon barn is a landmark for all to see and appreciate).

A better path (and we are making this appeal to you now) would be to allow some time for the Friends of Potato Creek to work with the park to determine the best use for the barn. On Tuesday (September 30), some members of the Friends group met with the park's property manager to ask for permission to assess the barn's physical condition. We were not given permission because it was deemed "unsafe" to the public and any permission would need to be granted by a higher authority.

The Friends group is willing to engage organizations that work to preserve important historical structures, such as the Indiana Barn Foundation and Indiana Landmarks. These groups have the expertise to first assess the physical condition of the barn (but access must be granted in order to get a close-up look at the interior of the barn). We could then use this information to estimate the cost of barn renovation.

Since it appears that the Naragon barn doesn't blend in with the new lodge being constructed nearby, we could formulate and present alternative solutions for saving or relocating the barn.

While we couldn't access the barn on Tuesday, a representative from Indiana Barn Foundation did look at the barn from a distance and provided his nominal assessment of the barn's condition. His assessment assured us that the barn was not in imminent danger of collapsing. Given that assessment, he suggested that the barn was in good enough shape to disassemble it and store it on the park property until a suitable alternate site could be located and a foundation prepared.

The Friends group would be willing to take on the task of raising funds to complete this relocation and barn renovation, but some time is needed. We need the time to complete an assessment of the barn and get estimates from experienced contractors to know the cost for disassembling the barn. The barn parts could then be stored until a suitable site could be found to rebuild the barn. We would need about 6 months to raise sufficient funds for this task.

We think that the Naragon barn is such a significant part of the park's history and the area's heritage that a project to "save the barn" would be both meaningful and the right thing to do!

Once relocated and renovated, the barn could be used by the park for multiple purposes. These could include recreational activities such as "barn" basketball (which was probably played in almost all Indiana barns in days past), corn hole, indoor volleyball, line dancing, and others. The barn could be made functional for storage space again (for which it was used for many years past). Interpretive programs could continue to be held in the barn to tell of the barn's and the park's histories.

We appeal to your sense of social conscience to allow some time to assess the barn's condition and raise funds to support a move of the barn to a new suitable location. Let's talk more!

Sincerely,

Eugene Matzat, Member
Friends of Potato Creek State Park

cc State Senator Mike Bohacek, State Representative Jake Teshka