

Editorial Comment

Spring 2011

In commenting on the relocation of the museum collection at Little Bighorn Battlefield, a *Billings Gazette* editorial [April 5] noted that this decision by the National Park Service “should serve as a wake-up call” to all stakeholders (both private and public) to “renew efforts to fund and build a visitor center that will allow the return of the archives to a permanent and worthy Montana home.”

We agree with this viewpoint.

Ideally a *secure* storage facility of adequate capacity in proximity to the Battlefield would solve this issue on a short-term basis pending the construction of a new Visitor Center in accordance with the 1986 General Management Plan of the park.

However, in today’s security conscious environment, *no* Federal agency would transfer such priceless public assets to a non-government entity without insisting on adequate safeguards over who (and what) goes in and out of such a facility in addition to compliance with such technical requirements as adequate climate control, fire and flood protection, ADA access, etc.

Such security concerns and the need for adequate controls are understandable in the wake of 9/11.

To our knowledge, *no* Montana site public or private can both accommodate the Battlefield’s collection *and* meet NPS or the American Association of Museum storage standards.

In such times of uncertain economic recovery and budget deficit challenges, Federal funding of a new Visitor Center is unlikely in the foreseeable future. Therefore, the initiative and responsibility must come from the private sector to raise the money, if not to design, plan and construct the new facility.

The creation of a new visitor center at Gettysburg National Military Park in 2008 (at a *different* location than the old structure) should be an effective example as to how to implement that part of Little Bighorn’s General Management Plan.

The private sector played a critical role in developing and paying for the 139,000 square foot Gettysburg facility, which was constructed at a total cost of \$125 million. Most of these funds were acquired by the Gettysburg Foundation, a nonprofit organization that will own and operate this Visitor Center for 20 years in cooperation with the Park Service.

Such an organization must be well-managed, open and transparent in its deliberations and receptive above all to diverse groups and views.

Several nonprofit Battlefield-related organizations, civic groups and tribal entities would form an excellent nucleus for a similar initiative at Little Bighorn. The members of these associations have the broad multiple talents and experience needed to play this important role.

Critical to this process is an open, constructive dialogue that considers, respects and assesses *all* viewpoints. In this spirit, we welcome comments and suggestions from *all* members *regardless* of perspective in order to facilitate the resolution of this issue.

Thus we must move forward to an effective solution that is a “win-win” for *all* who have a stake in the future of Little Bighorn Battlefield and a new Visitor Center.

Lee & Michele