

Waynesboro organization does not want 'One Renfrew'

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An organization that provides recreational and educational programming at a Franklin County park is locked in a dispute over its future.

The Renfrew Museum and Park has been a popular spot in Waynesboro for nearly half a century, since the property was willed to the Borough of Waynesboro by the last person to live there.

It is operated and managed by a seven-member board known as the Renfrew Committee Inc. and hosts a number of its own programs, many of them on aspects of local history.

The Institute at Renfrew also calls the park home and hosts a full slate of educational experiences for all ages. The organizations do partner on some events, such as the upcoming Pumpkin Festival.

In an effort to "better align" the property's organizational structure with what was requested in the will, the Borough of Waynesboro wants to combine these two nonprofit organizations into one entity, One Renfrew. The reorganization would lead to combined program and events calendars, one budget, unified fundraising efforts, and one team of paid staffers, under the management of the Renfrew Committee Inc.

"Most people perceive the site as simply 'Renfrew' and are eager to support any activities which will advance the mission of this special place without qualification," Borough Manager Jason Stains said in a news release. "As securing much-needed resources becomes increasingly difficult, joining forces and streamlining efforts would benefit both organizations greatly."

However, the Institute at Renfrew has no interest in giving up its autonomy.

Following discussion with its legal counsel, the board of the institute came to the unanimous decision that it "would not, under any circumstance, consider dissolution of its independent non-profit status. The Institute has a fiduciary duty to the individuals, businesses and civic organizations that have invested in its mission and activities for three decades," leadership said in a news release.

That key issue is just one of the problems leaders of the institute have with the One Renfrew proposal, according to Tracy Holliday, executive director of the Institute at Renfrew. She said in an email that she did not want to disclose the other issues at this time.

"This is a matter of supreme importance to The Institute, and our decisions will be guided by our care for the community it serves. I'm committed to helping the organization move forward in a way that will ensure continued fulfillment of our work and mission," Holliday said.

The history of Renfrew

The Renfrew Museum and Park is a 107-acre historic site and nature preserve nestled along the banks of Little Antietam Creek. It features a collection of antique furnishings and decorative art and 19th-century buildings, along with a public park with walking trails.

The Renfrew name comes from the Scottish-Irish family that settled the land for a time in the mid-1700s, according to the park website. German-American Daniel Royer later acquired and developed the property, and by the late 1800s it had two homesteads and a number of structures.

The Borough of Waynesboro received the land in 1973 as a bequest by Emma Geiser Nicodemus, the last person to live on the property. Her will stated that the property

should be used as a public park and that the 1812 stone house become a museum dedicated to early American life.

The will stipulated that a seven-member committee have "sole management responsibility" over the new institution, according to the borough. The Renfrew Board was created.

During the tenure of then-curator James Smith in the mid-1980s, Renfrew Museum and Park began offering programs for students, according to Holliday. Park leadership wanted to keep the popular programming going, but the board decided it could not afford to do so.

So, the Renfrew Board, with Waynesboro Borough Council, sought to create a nonprofit organization with "a charge of developing, administering, delivering and funding programs for school children on the site of Renfrew Museum and Park in two disciplines; environmental education and PA German farmstead interpretive programs," Holliday said. For its part, the borough said the Institute was created as the "supporting arm," of the park.

In 1996, the Renfrew Board became the Renfrew Committee Inc. The borough created the committee as an independent nonprofit responsible for managing all operations at the site.

Since then, the Institute at Renfrew and the Renfrew Committee have supported the mission and vision of Renfrew Museum and Park by hosting programs and events.

"Established as Renfrew Institute for Cultural and Environmental Studies in 1990, the organization undertook an organizational name change in conjunction with its 30th Anniversary and now operates as The Institute at Renfrew. The Institute has met its charge over 30 years, providing experiences for school children and families, and learners of all ages, through the school program series, along with a full slate of educational opportunities and family festivals for people of all ages," Holliday said.



Old lease, new agreement

As part of an effort to update agreements with various local entities, Waynesboro Borough Council decided that its 1996 lease agreement with Renfrew Committee Inc. was in need of an update, Stains said in a news release.

When the lease officially ends on Oct. 18, so will the facilities use agreement The Institute at Renfrew has with the committee. This is the legal document that allows the institute to operate on the property.

"The Borough has attempted to engage both RCI and The Institute in discussions regarding the use of Renfrew following the lease termination," according to Stains. "The Borough intends to enter into a lease agreement between the Waynesboro Borough and RCI. The goal of this new lease agreement is to reestablish 'One Renfrew', creating a single organization that offers many services to our community, bringing together into a single entity RCI (tasked with the overall management of Renfrew) and the supporting organization, The Institute."

Asked to elaborate more on One Renfrew, Borough Council President Harold Mumma would only say that the Nicodemus will require one governing organization at Renfrew.

"Our legal advice says it must be governed by a seven-member board. Period. There cannot be two Renfrews," he said.

Mumma said he could not say more, on the advice of legal counsel.

An unexpected announcement

Stains first published a news release online on Sept. 18 announcing efforts being made toward the One Renfrew initiative. This came just about a month after the borough first notified the committee and the institute that reorganization efforts were underway.

However, Holliday said the Institute at Renfrew had notified borough officials on Sept. 4 that its board of directors would not agree to dissolve the organization.

"The Institute's board requested direct dialogue with Borough officials in a Sept. 9 letter," she added. "Communication received from Borough Council President Harold Mumma last week, after their press release was published, indicated Borough officials are now willing to meet with up to 6 Institute board and staff leaders. That meeting is pending."

It is not clear what will happen to the Institute at Renfrew if an agreement is not reached by the Oct. 18 deadline, she added.

Stains said he did not have any comment beyond his news release.

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