

By Carolyn Lee

The Imperial Republican

The Nebraska Legislature passed LB 16 Monday, Feb. 11, transferring the ownership of Champion Mill State Historical Park from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) to Chase County, in which it is located.

LB 16 amended a bill passed last year doing the same thing. In LB 16, however, the property will remain with Chase County unless the county ceases to operate the property as a public park and recreation area, or a financial need arises that is detrimental to the county.

In either case, the title to the property would revert to NGPC.

State Sen. Mark Christensen of Imperial introduced the bill.

The whole question of property ownership began when NGPC approached the Chase County Historical Society to see if it would be interested in becoming the owner of the area.

The Historical Society suggested the county commissioners, who expressed interest.

Commissioner Don Weiss Jr. noted that five other sites in Nebraska have already transferred from NGPC to local cities, counties or Natural Resource Districts. "Ours is the only one with a historical site on it. That's why the Game and Parks will take it back if the county fails to run it.

He added that Champion residents are enthusiastic about the ownership transfer. NGPC is trying to reduce its operating costs by transferring ownership of some parks to local entities.

Kirk Nelson, West Regional Manager of the Parks Division, told commissioners over a year ago that the mill is "a state treasure on the National Register of Historic Places. We want to make sure it's preserved. It tells a beautiful story."

As the approval of the bill was so recent, commissioners have not yet received any paperwork concerning the transfer, according to Weiss Monday. "We don't even know what we get yet," he said.

Weiss stressed that the county won't take ownership of the property until July 1. No decisions have been made by the commissioners on anything, he stated.

"I presume a board will be put together" to operate the park, Weiss said. Concerns include lawn care, tours of the mill on weekends and holidays and pumping water to fill the lake.

Weiss noted that donations are coming in to support the area. He said the commissioners hope to operate the facility on donations.

Ten thousand dollars has been designated for the park in the county budget, but hasn't been used, Weiss said.