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GEOFF DORNAN / NEVADA APPEAL

The historic administration building and future cultural center of the Stewart Indian School complex.

# 'A LIVING LEGACY'

## Stewart Indian School moving to become historic museum and culture center

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After years of work and hopes, Stewart Indian School is poised to make a major leap forward in efforts to protect, restore and develop the complex into an historic site, museum and cultural center.

"Eventually we would like to create a destination heritage experience," said Sherry Rupert, head of the Nevada Indian Commission.

Two major pieces of legislation have already been approved toward that goal. There are elements in Gov. Brian Sandoval's proposed budget to help that process and she along with tribal supporters are creating a separate non-state nonprofit group modeled after the Friends of the Nevada State Museum.

They also have applied to the U.S. Forest Service for designation as a National Landmark.

"We believe this is the most intact Indian school across the nation," Rupert said. "We want to prove this place is unique, unlike any other."

Stewart Indian School opened in December 1890 with 37 students from local Washoe, Paiute and Western Shoshone tribes. It operated until 1980, serving more than 30,000 students during those 90 years.

Assembly Bill 15 by the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources would sell off two parcels of state land in the Clear Creek area to be sold to raise money for rehabilitation and restoration of historic buildings at Stewart. Rupert



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Sherry Rupert, head of the Nevada Indian Commission, at the kiosk that provides visitors with maps of the Stewart Indian School complex.

said the commission will have a seat on the committee that will set priorities for the use of the money.

Senate Bill 63 creates a gift fund for the Indian commission and designates it as the coordinating agency for uses of the student school.

"Tribal people will have a say in the future uses of the school," she said. "This place was created for Indian

# STEWART

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students. They would like it to remain that way.”

Both bills have passed the legislature and been signed into law by Sandoval.

In addition, Rupert said the governor’s budget includes two positions to help create the school “as a living legacy.” They are a museum director and a curator to begin planning and “sifting and cataloging the collections to develop exhibits.”

Rupert said there are numerous artifacts, documents, and all sorts of other items related to the history of the school, many of them collected and protected by Buildings and Grounds.

She said when the school closed, many people took materials with them from the campus and she hoped that people who have those items would be willing to

donate them back.

Finally, the Capital Improvement Projects budget includes funding to work on the design of a welcoming center for Stewart and to begin creation of a master plan “to put some numbers to these buildings.”

The existing campus, Rupert said, includes more than 50 historic buildings on 110 acres of state land at the southern border of Carson City. Most of those buildings, from the old Superintendent’s residence to the dormitories, auditorium and faculty residences, were built out of native stone by the students themselves.

The auditorium, she said, has huge potential with about 300 seats before its stage, but needs a lot of work.

Most, she said, are in remarkably good shape. The dorms, in fact, are still used to house cadets attending

Peace Officer Standards and Training academies.

The Superintendent’s residence is the Indian Commission’s headquarters including Rupert’s office. What was once the dorm housing for young male students — some as young as four — is now used by the Department of Corrections.

Rupert said the old administration building will become the school’s cultural center with space for research into the history of the school and of the 27 tribes in Nevada. She also envisions space for artists to display their works and retail space for native artists.

She said there’s a lot of interest in native arts and craft works but at present there’s no place for those artists to set up their works for possible sale.

The research and historic value of the school, she

said, is key — including the darker side of the school’s history, the fact Indian schools were created “to assimilate our children.”

Those children were separated from their families and raised in a regimented, military-style environment. They were marched to and from their meals, academic and vocational programs. They wore uniforms and were assigned identity numbers.

Rupert said the thinking was those students “would be more willing to give up the land and culture.”

She said in a sense it worked because those graduates too often refused to teach their historic language and culture to their children.

“That history is widely unknown,” Rupert said. “We want to get that history out there.”

For most of its 90 years,

the school focused on vocational classes, teaching trades from agriculture to mechanics, carpentry, nursing, and masonry. But in the 1960s the school shifted more to academic education.

She said there’s growing interest in the history of Stewart with more and more tourists coming to tour the campus. In May alone, she said more than 400 people came, including many students from Las Vegas.

The enabling legislation, staffing and other funding, she said, will get all these efforts moving to create what she described as an important historic cultural center for Nevada and the nation.

“As a destination and cultural experience, it will be unlike any other across the nation because it’s so intact,” said Rupert.