

Mendota Dakota center due to be leveled for a parking lot

be torn down.

By **NICOLE NORFLEET**, Star Tribune



Nicole Norfleet, Star Tribune

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The orange house where the Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota Community has been based for the past couple of years may soon be razed and paved over.

A representative of the next-door Axel's River Grille has put down a deposit on the property with plans to turn it into a parking lot, which the restaurant badly needs.

Mendota Dakota Community Center

The Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota Community has gotten a 60-day notice to vacate the building so it can

While the sale hasn't been finalized, the Mendota Dakota recently received a 60-day notice to vacate the building at

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1324 Sibley Memorial Hwy. by the end of March.

"It's our homeland," said Curtis LaClaire, tribal council chairman. "They are tearing down our office to make a parking lot for a bar."

For months, the 300-member Mendota Dakota has been struggling to find the money to pay rent on the dilapidated two-story structure where it holds tribal council meetings, language classes and other activities.

Funds from a three-year, \$60,000 Otto Bremer Foundation grant have dwindled, and the group was denied additional funds. The

rent for the building had been slashed for a couple of months to compensate for a problem with the building's water supply, which was recently fixed by a member of the tribal council. But the group was having trouble paying even the reduced rent.

The Mendota Dakota does not have federal government recognition as a tribe, and therefore it doesn't have access to funds and services from the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

While tribal leaders are upset about the sale, it's not the building itself to which they are attached, but the land, which is special to them because it is in Mendota and near where the



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Minnesota and Mississippi rivers meet. This is where the Mendota Dakota tradition holds that life began.

LaClaire said that if the group had the money, it would probably try to demolish the building in order to put up a better one.

But it seems that Axel's has beaten them to the punch.

While the purchase will be made by a separate entity and not by Axel's directly, the restaurant has taken the steps necessary to purchase the property. According to City Attorney Tom Lehmann, Dave Walia, vice president of operations for Bonfire

Restaurant Co., which oversees Axel's, has deposited earnest money to secure the purchase.

Axel's is one of two full-service restaurants in the tiny town. It's the flagship of Axel's restaurants, which, including its Axel's Bonfire restaurants, has locations throughout the metro area, including in Eagan, Woodbury and St. Paul.

Overflow parking at the VFW

Axel's small parking lot is next to the Mendota Dakota's building. The restaurant now uses overflow parking at the nearby VFW to accommodate diners, Walia said.

"We are currently in a non-

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compliance situation," he said about parking.

After the demolition and work on the lot, Axel's hopes to have an additional 24 spaces.

Parking is an issue that plagues the city, Walia said at a recent City Council meeting.

"Consumers aren't willing to stop when they see cars parked along the freeway," he said.

City Council Member Alan Ralston agreed that the project would be good for the city. He said it would be safer for people not to have to park and then cross the highway to get to Axel's.

"I certainly applaud your efforts," he told Walia.

At the March meeting, the City Council hopes to get input from the residents who would live next to the planned parking lot.

The owner of the property where the Mendota Dakota center is located did not return phone calls, but Dakota County property records show that the building and lot of about 1,200 square feet were recently valued at \$185,500.

LaClaire said the Mendota Dakota still plan to try to fight the plans, but he didn't give any details about what actions the group would take. In the

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meantime, it has ordered a Dumpster and has started to clean out some of its belongings, he said.

A Mendota attorney has offered to share some office space with the group.

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