Dear Editor:

News stories by the Associated Press and the Bismarck Tribune combined with letters to the editor have spread false information about the proposed purchase of the Welk Homestead at Strasburg by the State Historical Society of North Dakota.

Here are some facts:

1. While the Schwab family owns the site, they have never operated it. The site was leased by Pioneer Heritage, Inc. in 1991 and developed and restored by that group. All admission fees have gone to Pioneer Heritage. Owners Evelyn and Edna (Welk) Schwab are two of the most dedicated workers and volunteers of Pioneer Heritage. Like other workers, they were paid a low wage to give tours of the farmstead where they were born and raised as was their uncle, Lawrence Welk. They also received a small annual lease payment from Pioneer Heritage.

2. The farmstead had not been occupied for many years when Pioneer Heritage leased it, and the sod house and outbuildings were in a run down condition. With $147,000 in donations from local community members and some support by the Lawrence Welk family, the site was developed. In addition to the house, there is a summer kitchen, blacksmith shop and buggy shed along with a sound but unrestored barn.

3. Pioneer Heritage owns most of the antiques displayed at the site. The certified appraised value of the items is $49,750. SHSND will receive the antiques when they purchase the homestead.

4. The 2013 North Dakota Legislature appropriated $100,000 to purchase the property with the caveat that unspecified repairs be made at the site. The repairs needed involve painting some of the buildings and doing some remodeling in the barn to meet public safety codes. All of that can be done by volunteers, and the cost of the materials can be paid for with donations. The Tri-County Tourism Alliance, people in the Strasburg community and others concerned about the site have already offered to pay reasonable costs.

5. The Associated Press reported SHSND had estimated the repairs at $584,000. The Associated Press was wrong. Unfortunately, the Bismarck Tribune repeated the error in a story about the most recent meeting of the SHSND Board of Directors. A feasibility study prepared in 2012, months before the legislature acted, includes the $584,000; however, that amount was never presented to the legislature, and it is only a wish list of what it might cost to renovate the barn into an interpretive center, possibly build a visitor center and other expansions of the site. It has nothing to do with “repairs.” Any future additions to the site would have to get legislative approval. Neither the Associated Press nor the Bismarck Tribune has printed a correction of this damaging misinformation.

6. The Welk Homestead will be the first pioneer farm, first sod house and first Germans from Russian interpretive site to tell the homesteading story of the state’s largest pioneering ethnic group. It would also be the first state historic site in south central North Dakota and would be the first historic site and tourist information center on U.S. Highway 83 above the border with South Dakota. In addition, the site is the birthplace and childhood home of Lawrence Welk, the first inductee into the Theodore Roosevelt Rough Rider Hall of Fame.

7. The project has been endorsed by the Fargo Forum, Grand Forks Herald, Dickinson Press, Jamestown Sun and the Emmons County Record and opposed by the Bismarck Tribune.

Most people would surely conclude that paying $100,000 for property on the National Register of Historic Places with $147,000 in improvements and antiques worth $49,750 plus another $45,000-$50,000 in deferred maintenance repairs would be a pretty good deal. Unfortunately, the misinformation being spread is making what should be a slam-dunk decision into a drawn-out process.

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Letter addresses media errors