

July 2, 2021

Scotts Bluff County Board of Commissioners
Administration Building
1825 10th Street
Gering, Nebraska 69341

Commissioners:

For over 50 years in Nebraska, the ACLU has worked in courts, legislatures, and communities to protect the constitutional and individual rights of all people. With a nationwide network of offices and millions of members and supporters, we take up the toughest civil liberties fights. Beyond one person, party, or side — we the people dare to create a more perfect union.



Nebraska

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The ACLU of Nebraska aims to preserve and extend constitutionally guaranteed rights to people who have historically been denied their rights on the basis of race. In pursuit of a world free of discrimination and a Nebraska that is true to the state motto of “Equality Before the Law,” the ACLU of Nebraska works in coalition with other civil rights groups and advocates in Nebraska to lobby in the local and state legislature and support grassroots movements. Through these efforts, we strive to educate and empower the public on a variety of issues, including how race relates to criminal justice, economic justice, and inequality in education.

Several media outlets have described a suggestion that Scotts Bluff County Commissioners plan to not recognize Juneteenth as a county holiday.¹ We urge you to recognize this historically important date as it would be a disappointing act and a disservice to the residents of Scotts Bluff County and all Nebraskans.

The authors of the Declaration of Independence outlined a bold vision for America: a nation in which there would be equal justice for all. Of course, that aspiration was not the reality at the time of drafting and more than two hundred years later, it has yet to be fully achieved. The enslavement of those of African descent marked the beginnings of a system of racial injustice in our country. And Juneteenth is a recognition of a significant historical event for our country—it is a date commemorating the end of slavery in the United States. It is also called Emancipation Day or Juneteenth Independence Day. Juneteenth has been a Texas

¹ Maunette Loeks, *New Juneteenth holiday prompts Scotts Bluff commissioners to say how many holidays are enough?*, JOURNAL STAR, June 25, 2021, available at https://journalstar.com/news/state-and-regional/nebraska/new-juneteenth-holiday-prompts-scotts-bluff-commissioners-to-say-how-many-holidays-are-enough/article_7902472b-f45e-5ada-bab9-8076c13fc296.html?utm_campaign=snd-autopilot&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook_&fbclid=IwAR1Qn9tnrWfBvFU67ijIJ6t6B1hxOnIXZLSYp_x05C3QAL4Di1ZlazYNvUY; see also https://kearneyhub.com/news/state-and-regional/nebraska/new-juneteenth-holiday-prompts-scotts-bluff-commissioners-to-say-how-many-holidays-are-enough/article_93707f9e-c578-5b8a-8209-67e117a4a07a.html; https://omaha.com/news/state-and-regional/scotts-bluff-county-may-not-recognize-juneteenth/article_32600046-6acf-5ae6-96ab-f130fcbdb9f6.html.



state holiday since 1980. Juneteenth references and acknowledges June 19, 1865, the date that the Union Major General Gordon Granger rode into Galveston, Texas, to spread the news of the Emancipation Proclamation outlawing slavery in Confederate states. President Abraham Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation some two years earlier, but not until Maj. Gen. Granger informed those in Texas did all people formerly enslaved receive formal notice of the proclamation.

On June 17, 2021, President Biden signed a bill into law that recognized June 19th as a federal holiday, officially known as the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act. The bill that the President signed received overwhelming bipartisan support and was passed unanimously in the US Senate. Significantly, all of Nebraska's Congressional delegation voted for the bill² and Governor Pete Ricketts acted swiftly to recognize Juneteenth³.

While existing law may provide counties with some latitude regarding this issue declining to recognize this important holiday would send a chilling message that Scotts Bluff County seeks to silence and erase Juneteenth. Juneteenth is a holiday that we must all remember together to truly begin repairing the wrongs of our country's dark past. We implore you to think very carefully about the message you send by honoring all other state and federal holidays while singling out Juneteenth as different or somehow unworthy of recognition. We remind you to look at the experience of Arizona and Martin Luther King Jr. Day as a cautionary tale.⁴

Practically speaking, this misguided course of action under consideration could also cause confusion for your constituents seeking public services because county agencies work regularly and closely with state agencies. The work of county employees is interrelated to that of state employees and many tasks overlap. In fact, some county and state agencies share building space in the administration buildings for Scotts Bluff County and it would make little sense to insist that county agencies remain open while state agencies close in honor of Juneteenth. The fiscal "savings" sought by ignoring the significance of Juneteenth will be outweighed by constituent confusion and government inefficiency that will result in "opting out" of a singular federal holiday.

The significance of Juneteenth is important. It reminds all of us that the historical journey toward racial justice, liberation, and healing continues today. While much progress has been made, much work remains on educational equity,

² Mike DeBonis, *Congress votes overwhelmingly to make Juneteenth a federal holiday. The day commemorates the end of slavery in Texas in 1865*, THE WASHINGTON POST, June 16, 2021, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/juneteenth-federal-holiday/2021/06/16/7be284d8-ceba-11eb-a7f1-52b8870bef7c_story.html?outputType=amp.

³ Office of Governor Pete Ricketts, *State Offices to Close June 18th to Observe Juneteenth*, June 17, 2021, <https://governor.nebraska.gov/press/state-offices-close-june-18th-observe-juneteenth>.

⁴ Corbin Carson, *The Rocky History of Martin Luther King Jr. Day in Arizona*, KTAR News, Jan. 20, 2020, <https://ktar.com/story/1903240/history-martin-luther-king-jr-day-arizona/>.

economic opportunity, criminal justice reform, and voting rights. The people of Scotts Bluff County deserve to be on the right side of history. We urge the Board to not pursue any effort to reject recognizing Juneteenth as a holiday.

Respectfully,



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