

Statement of Reverend Ralph David Abernathy, III

House Natural Resources Subcommittee

Public Lands and Environmental Regulation

H.R 4119 (Johnson of GA), the "*West Hunter Street Baptist Church Study Act*"

July 29, 2014

Mr. Chairman and honorable members of the committee

On behalf of the American civil rights movement, a legacy steeped in the moral principles of non-violence and civil disobedience, and for the preservation of American history I address you today.

I speak with the support of the honorable gentlemen from Georgia, Congressman Hank Johnson and Congressman Austin Scott and 76 of their colleagues members of this August body and most importantly, I speak with the support of the Vine City communities and the Atlanta University community in which this historic church resides on the Martin Luther King Jr., corridor. Not only is this church historical, but the area is as well in helping shape American society. This community became a think tank for the American civil rights movement after Montgomery, Alabama and the West Hunter Street Baptist Church became the spiritual work place. Across the street from the church, Pascal's restaurant lounge and hotel became a place to convene with civil rights leaders, Dr. Abernathy and Dr. King and activist, community leaders, educators, clergy, business men and woman, black entertainers and actors and many others. The church held many civil rights mass meetings, strategy sessions and nonviolent conflict resolution training. Decisions were made at this church that had a direct impact on influencing American culture.

For example; the decision was made at his church for the go-ahead for the Selma to Montgomery march on the Edmond Pettis on Sunday March 7, 1963 which is known in American history as "Bloody Sunday" which changed the face of American policy with the passing of the voting rights act in helping shape a more perfect union.

When white students came from the north, to help register blacks in the south during what is known in history as "Freedom Summer" voter education project, the church served as a training and workshop center for the Mississippi summer project where black and white student attended nonviolent workshop and conflict resolution seminars in an effort to conduct voter registration drives throughout the south with emphasis on Mississippi and Alabama.

The church provided space for the Atlanta university students association called (UMBU) University movement for black unity. Get out the vote operations to elect Maynard Jackson as the first black mayor of a major city of in the south.

The church was a meeting place and conducted strategy and field operations to elect Andrew Young, first black Congressmen from Georgia.

The Historic Preservation of West Hunter Street Baptist Church represents commitment to remembering the past and preparation for a sustainable future.

By preserving historic structures, we are able to share the very spaces and environments in which the generations before us lived. Historic preservation is the visual and tangible conservation of cultural identity. In addition to solidifying a community's past, preservation can help strengthen a community's future. Historic buildings help create vibrant, cultural areas that draw tourism, art, festivals, and other activities which in turn draw investment, revenue, and economic growth. This museum/community educational resource center will be the centerpiece of the community. Local residents can also benefit through interpretive components such as learning and educational resources that illustrate a special meaning between its past, present and future.

The RDA National Historical Center will become the hub for community empowerment and will feature interactive gallery tours. Our goal is to create and promote a learning environment for the entire family. We will offer an educational resource center for student research on the civil rights movement. Parents and K-12 students will have an educational resource center focused on the civil rights movement and the 6 pioneers of that movement and with the "Remember Them" monument to help bridge the gap between the past and the present generations. It's more than a historic site, it's a center for empowerment and transformation – a living legacy. The preservation of this last historic civil rights church site will also include a park, "Freedom Plaza", to encourage families to gather, reflect and interact with nature and history.

My father Dr. Ralph David Abernathy, Sr., and Dr. Martin King Jr., were co-founders and co-leaders of the American civil rights movement. They started out together in Montgomery, Alabama when my father was called to organize the first meeting around the arrest of Ms. Parks and were together as civil rights twins until the assassination of Dr. King who died cradled in my father's arms. My father with the courage to walk alone picked up the mantle of leadership and completed the work of the civil rights movement.

They have a date with destiny and a rendezvous with eternity and I encourage the passage of this most important legislation in honor of their great American legacy.

Thank you and God bless you