

Statement of Donna M. Williams  
Chair, Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission

before the House Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation

concerning H.R. 706 – the Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park Establishment Act

July 23, 2013

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today regarding legislation that is of vital importance to not only the Blackstone River Valley, the 24 cities and towns within that valley, and the states of Massachusetts and Rhode Island in which the valley is located, but also to the preservation of an important part of our nation's history, the story of how the industrialization of America began.

My name is Donna Williams. I am the Chair of the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission, which was created, by Congress, in 1986 to oversee what was then a still novel approach to large-scale heritage preservation, without large-scale federal land acquisition. More about that later. I am also the Chair of the Board of Directors of Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, Inc., a nonprofit organization created to continue the work of the Commission in the event of its sunset. As you may know, that event actually occurred last October, but then was superseded in March of this year by a provision in the Continuing Resolution which renewed the Commission's authorization, but only for the current fiscal year.

Both the Commission and its nonprofit successor believe that this legislation is:

- critically important to preserve the significant investments that have been made over the last 27 years in preservation and community revitalization, not only by the federal government but also by our numerous government and nongovernment partners that have matched the federal investments many times over; please refer to the colorful handout we have provided for examples of projects and programs and accomplishments made possible by these investments and by this very successful leveraging (this is, by the way, a handout developed for the purpose of raising operating funds - we are doing our best to diversify our financial plan as part of our sustainability strategy);
- critically important to protect the integrity of those resource areas that have been found to be of particular, national significance, such that they both deserve and need the extra level of protection that the National Park Service is able to provide; these include Slater Mill, the first water-powered textile mill where it all began; historic mill villages that were the next chapter in the story of industrialization and that are still a unique feature in the cultural landscape of the valley; and the Blackstone River and Canal, which not only are at the center of the valley's industrial history, but also tell a powerful environmental story of degradation and restoration,

becoming a major natural and recreational resource and thereby once again providing economic stimulus; and

- critically important to sustain the partnership between the National Park Service and the surrounding community for the purpose of preserving a living and working landscape, in which preservation goes hand in hand with innovation and economic vitality, education with recreation and public health, and stewardship with diversity and community pride.

This legislation has a long history. It is supported by a Special Resource Study Congress asked the National Park Service to undertake quite a few years ago, to determine what the future role of the Park Service should be in the Blackstone Valley, after some 20 years of National Heritage Corridor experience. This analysis was to include, but not be limited to, a determination whether it would be appropriate and feasible to establish a national park in the Blackstone Valley. I emphasize that because I believe this is directly relevant to what the bill before you actually proposes, and what it does not propose. It does not propose to turn the whole National Heritage Corridor into a national park. It does not propose a large-scale acquisition program to create a huge federal jurisdiction and western-style park. It very much builds on what is already there and does not displace, replace or duplicate it. It proposes a relatively small park in the context of the larger Corridor. It respects that context and takes advantage of it at the same time by emphasizing partnership between the park and the Corridor. This continues a core Corridor principle and strategy, partnership, that is probably more responsible than anything else for the success of the Corridor and for the community support it enjoys. This is a big reason why the legislation has such strong support at home, in both states, in each community, across sectors and political parties. At the same time, it allows the new park to take advantage of existing community relations, infrastructure, partners and volunteers, and enhances the ability of the Park Service to do its job within the boundaries of its park, but also to have a positive impact outside the park, within the larger Corridor. All at a cost that is significantly lower than if the whole Corridor were to be designated a national park, or even if a smaller new park had to be created “from scratch.”

For those of you who are interested in history, I recommend the Special Resource Study as a good read. It contains an eloquent chapter on the valley’s history, as well as a scholarly analysis of the significance of its historical and cultural resources. I note that the study applied very high standards to determine which areas should be recommended for inclusion in the park; if I am not mistaken they are the same ones used to determine whether a site can be designated as a National Historic Landmark; not an easy benchmark by any means. Scholars from all over the country participated in the study, including several field visits and public meetings. And their work was scrutinized by professionals in the Park Service and the Department of Interior before the requisite findings were made that the criteria for a new national park were met.

Public involvement was an important aspect of the study process. Public meetings were held at several stages, in both Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and well attended. They generally reflected broad public support. Critical comments involved questions why other sites or areas, in particular in Massachusetts, were not proposed to be included in the park. In addition, Park Service and Corridor staff met with municipal leaders in communities where the proposed park would be located. These

were productive meetings in which communities expressed their enthusiasm about benefits of a national park, as well as appreciation for the respect shown towards local authority, for example in the case of historic districts.

When the legislation was first introduced, therefore, it immediately had strong bi-state support. This was clear when Senator Jack Reed and Congressman David Cicilline were joined by their MA and RI colleagues as co-sponsors of the legislation in the Senate and the House, respectively. We are enormously grateful to all of them for their efforts and support. Also, city and town boards and councils all through the Corridor passed resolutions in support of the legislation, as did numerous partner organizations and institutions. I would like to emphasize again that this support is truly “across the board.” Our partners and supporters include people, organizations and institutions in the public and private sectors, preservationists and environmentalists, chambers of commerce, bankers and developers, educational institutions and school districts, museums and historic sites, youth organizations, recreational fishermen, canoe and kayaking associations, bicycling advocates and, of course, politicians.

We are aware that the legislation currently before you, introduced earlier this year, is the product of a collaborative effort between congressional, committee and Park Service staff and their superiors. We are grateful for that effort and believe that the result is a strong bill that provides great vision, strong direction, as well as flexibility and caution when it comes to implementation. I also want to point out the state-level support for this proposal, as evidenced by the willingness of Rhode Island to donate its Blackstone River State Park to be included in this National Historical Park, thereby providing us with a wonderful opportunity to create a truly special park experience in that location, across the river from Ashton Mill Village.

In closing, I want to make one, urgent request. Please vote to approve this legislation, and please do so as quickly as possible. The Park Service presence in the Corridor has been reduced drastically already and is expected to be reduced to just two ranger positions after September 30. This will be inadequate to sustain the level of interpretive and educational programming that we are known for and that is needed, let alone sustain our many partnership projects and programs. Although the nonprofit is assuming more and more responsibility, it does not have the capacity to cover the additional loss of Park Service staff. We have been operating with this uncertainty as best as we can, but fear that after 27 years of real success we might actually fail, just when our goal of a partnership with a National Historical Park is in sight. We need this Park. We need this legislation. Thank you.