

Committee on Resources

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STATEMENT OF DONALD DAY FORMER MAYOR OF THE CITY OF SULPHUR

Testimony before the
RESOURCES COMMITTEE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
July 15, 2004

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee: I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss H.R. 4066 to provide for the conveyance of certain land to the United States to be held in trust for the Chickasaw Nation and to revise the boundary of Chickasaw National Recreation Area in Oklahoma. Over fifteen years ago, the Chickasaw Nation had the idea and began developing a plan to build a multi-million dollar cultural center to highlight the Chickasaw people and their history. The focus of the Chickasaw Nation Cultural Center is to preserve Chickasaw culture, heritage and history for future generations. The park land to be exchanged adjoins the cultural center site.

The Chickasaw Nation identified a location for its cultural center adjacent to the Chickasaw National Recreation Area, which is managed by the National Park Service. At the suggestion of then CNRA Superintendent, Gerard Baker, the National Park Service has agreed to exchange the piece of property for land of equal value that was owned by the City of Sulphur. The City of Sulphur agreed to donate the property to the Chickasaw Nation who will in turn exchange the property with the National Park Service.

The land to be exchanged is located within and adjacent to the Chickasaw National Recreation Area in Sulphur, Oklahoma. The plans include constructing museums, galleries, an amphitheater and a traditional Chickasaw village. The cultural center is expected to attract thousands of visitors to the area, and consequently to Sulphur. As the former Mayor and a six-term Councilman, I represent the City of Sulphur in requesting legislation authorizing an exchange of land between the Chickasaw Nation and the National Park Service.

Approval by this Committee will not only provide a culturally and historically significant location for the Chickasaw Nation Cultural Center but will also further protect the watershed and resources of the Chickasaw National Recreation Area. Thank you for your consideration of H.R. 4066.

Historical Perspective

This transfer of land represents the latest opportunity for cooperation among a partnership that has lasted more than one hundred years. This story begins in 1895, when the City of Sulphur was established and located within The Chickasaw Nation in Indian Territory. Settlement in the area now known as Chickasaw National Recreation Area centered on the streams and springs, resulting in pollution and desecration of these important natural resources. In response to this threat, the Chickasaw Nation, which owned the land, offered it for sale to the Federal Government with the request that the government protect and preserve the area. In 1902, the area was acquired, assigned to the National Park Service for management, and designated as Sulphur Springs Reservation. Four years later, as it became clear that a wider buffer zone was needed to protect the springs from encroaching development, the area was enlarged and designated as Platt National Park. Both times, the corporate limits of the City of Sulphur were moved – and the residents relocated – to accommodate the new federal boundaries.

In the mid-1960s, the Bureau of Reclamation began construction on a reservoir project southwest of Platt National Park. This lake, completed in 1968, was also assigned to the National Park Service for management and was designated as Arbuckle Recreation Area. In 1976, the two management areas were combined to form the Chickasaw National Recreation Area.

Sulphur: Gateway to the Chickasaw National Recreation Area

Since its inception, the City of Sulphur has owned land south of the CNRA. Located on this property is a small no-wake lake, developed as a city reservoir, and known as Veteran's Lake. The City operated this facility as a recreation area for many years, but in the early 1980s, the City realized that it could no longer provide the needed protection and maintenance. The lake and the surrounding 300 acres provided a vital link between the Platt and Arbuckle Districts. Recognizing the importance of preserving this area and appreciating the National Park Service's ability to manage it appropriately, the City Council voted to donate

this property to the Federal Government in 1983.

The City of Sulphur and the National Park Service have worked in tandem since statehood. The City provides water, wastewater and sanitation services; provides dispatch services for federal law enforcement officials; and provides fire protection when needed to the NPS. The City respects the federal mandate for protection and preservation of the natural resources of the Park and appreciates the economic impact of the three million annual visitors to the Park.

Vision of the Chickasaw Nation Cultural Center

The first discussions regarding the development of a Chickasaw Nation cultural center took place among representatives of the City of Sulphur, the Chickasaw Nation and the National Park Service in the mid-1980s. The Nation considered some fourteen different sites located in and around Chickasaw National Recreation Area and settled on a 29 acre tract located beside Rock Creek, along the northwestern edge of CNRA. This tract met the needs of the Nation by providing them with a culturally significant location for the new center, and the needs of the National Park Service by allowing them to maintain protection of Rock Creek, a most significant water resource. It was understood by all parties that any transfer of land would need to be a zero-sum game, and the City of Sulphur offered to provide the balance needed to cement the deal. Gerard Baker, former CNRA Superintendent, identified a tract of land owned by the City which is as valuable to the NPS as the 29 acre tract is to the Nation.

The land which has been transferred to the Chickasaw Nation from the City of Sulphur consists of approximately 38.96 acres which surround more than a mile of Wilson Creek. This is the creek that feeds Veteran's Lake. By acquiring this tract, the National Park Service will improve its ability to protect Veteran's Lake and the quality of this important natural amenity.

Benefits of Cooperation

This three-way arrangement – the transfer of the tract of land from the City to the Chickasaw Nation, and the exchange of land between the Nation and the National Park Service – is the culmination of five years of formal negotiations, preceded by ten years of informal cooperation among the parties. Preservation and protection of the cultural heritage of the Chickasaw Nation began one hundred two years ago, when the Nation asked the Federal Government to protect the Sulphur Springs and indirectly created the Chickasaw National Recreation Area, which is the lifeblood of this community. The Nation now has the ability to participate in that preservation, and the City of Sulphur proudly and gladly welcomes the opportunity to help make the Cultural Center vision a reality.

The impact of the Chickasaw Nation Cultural Center on south central and southeastern Oklahoma will be immeasurable. Phase I represents a \$35M investment and the creation of one hundred jobs. The value of planned commercial and residential collateral development is approximately \$15M. The City is planning a \$2M water service expansion project as further evidence that it supports this endeavor one hundred percent. The Chickasaw Nation Cultural Center will define Sulphur and Murray County as a tourist destination. In addition to the local and regional economic boost, this facility will positively impact local educational institutions by providing a world class destination for local and regional students. Finally, the Cultural Center will distinguish itself through its presentation of cultural and environmental protection and preservation, no doubt becoming a model for other entities.

Conclusion

Designs for Phase I of the Cultural Center have been completed and preliminary site work is set to begin as soon as possible. Immediate passage of this Bill will allow construction to begin as early as autumn 2004.

For all these reasons, the City of Sulphur requests that this Bill be presented to the House for a vote during this session of the 108th Congress, and the City urges each Representative to vote in favor of this Bill.