

Testimony of Thomas J. Condon re: HB

House Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands

June 10, 2010

Thank you, Congressman Larson and committee members, for inviting me to testify about how National Park status for Coltsville would affect the City of Hartford. I came to Hartford in 1971, after serving in the Army in Vietnam. Coltsville at the time was still a manufacturing center, producing the M-16 rifle, among other things. Since then manufacturing at the site slowed and then stopped, Colt's moved to a newer facility in West Hartford. By the 1980s the complex, the lofts of the South and East Armories in particular, had become an artists' colony, a two-building SoHo district. For the past decade, the property has moved haltingly toward a major revival.

In many ways this parallels the situation of the city. As I'm sure you know, because of the precision machining pioneered by Sam Colt, the Connecticut River Valley was the Silicon Valley of the 19th Century, and Sam and Elizabeth Colt were in some respects its Bill and Melinda Gates. Manufacturing, along with insurance and agriculture, made Hartford what the author Henry James called "The richest little city in America."

No mas. In the postwar period, a number of factors — loss of manufacturing, middle-class flight, bungled urban renewal and misplaced highways — have caused Connecticut's capital city to be listed among the 10 poorest cities in its population category. And since the late 1990s, there's been a steady effort to revive the city, with new downtown housing, the move of a community college and other education programs to downtown, the construction of a major science center and a state convention center and a major restructuring of the city's public schools.

The revival of Coltsville as a vibrant, mixed-use community, as well as a tourist destination, would be a logical next step.

The National Park designation would not by itself be the big bang, the silver bullet, that saves Hartford. Hartford has chased that siren all too often. But the park would stir the drink, be a major asset in itself and the catalyst that makes other things easier to accomplish.

The park designation would expedite the completion of the Coltsville revival by Mr. Robbins, meaning that Connecticut's most iconic 19th century factory complex would be saved and reused, become a place to live, eat, work, watch vintage baseball at Colt Park or just hang out. Reusing its great mill and factory structures is one of the ways New England cities can achieve smart-growth density and vibrancy. The Colt complex would be home to hundreds of jobs and residents, it has more than 100 jobs and nearly 50 residents now, people want to be there. For

heritage tourists, it pairs flawlessly with the Springfield Armory, the Mark Twain and Harriet Beecher Stowe houses and other Victorian treasures.

It will make downtown Hartford bigger. Unfortunate highway placement in the 1960s shrunk the size of downtown Hartford to about six by eight blocks, too small to be the center of a metropolitan region of 1.1 million people. Recognizing this, the Adriaen's Landing development in the past decade expanded downtown a couple of blocks east to the Connecticut River. Coltsville would move downtown further to the south. It is the only plausible mixed-use, mixed-income area of new development within walking distance of downtown. With Coltsville as a southern anchor, Hartford could embark on a program of infill, which is usually easier to achieve than fringe downtown development. This, in time, will give Greater Hartford the downtown it needs.

Another strong argument for the Coltsville project is its transit orientation. Connecticut, like the rest of the country, is belatedly rediscovering that trains can move people more efficiently than cars without using as much land or fossil fuel, and that people who would never live next to a highway are happy to live near a rail stop. Connecticut and Massachusetts are now bringing commuter and high speed rail to the New Haven-Hartford-Springfield line. Coltsville is adjacent to a parallel north-south rail line with a lot of potential stops from downtown Hartford to Wesleyan University in Middletown and on to the new Katharine Hepburn Arts Center in Old Saybrook.

Beyond the tracks, under a highway and through a dike — when the planned gate through the dike is completed in a couple of years — Coltsville residents will have access to the Connecticut River. For nearly three decades, a terrific nonprofit called Riverfront Recapture has worked to reconnect Hartford with its river, after they were separated by another unfortunate highway placement. The Coltsville National Park would connect to Riverfront's three-mile system of parks on both sides of the river, creating marvelous recreational opportunities from hiking, biking, boating and fishing to UConn football on the East Hartford side of the river.

It wasn't the guns per se that were the key to the Colt contribution as much as it was the precision machining. If all went well, the Coltsville National Park would give emphasis to machining skills, hopefully incubating such businesses in that part of the city. With 700,000 sq feet in the Colt complex, much is possible.

Hartford, like many old New England cities, is the hole in its own donut, the small center of a larger metro area. The city is only 18 square miles, and has about 11 percent of the region's population — but a majority of its social ills. Cities are rarely static, they are getting worse or they are getting better. National Park status for Coltsville has been a cause of The Hartford

Courant for many years, because we believe it would be a major incremental step in Hartford's progress. I know of no one in the community who doesn't feel this way.

Thank you