

Committee on Resources,
Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, & Public Lands
parks - - Rep. Joel Hefley, Chairman
U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6207 - - (202) 226-7736

Witness Statement

STATEMENT OF JOHN ROBBINS, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, CULTURAL RESOURCES STEWARDSHIP AND PARTNERSHIPS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, RECREATION, AND PUBLIC LANDS, OF THE HOUSE RESOURCES COMMITTEE, CONCERNING H. R. 1776, TO AUTHORIZE THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR TO STUDY THE SUITABILITY AND FEASIBILITY OF ESTABLISHING THE BUFFALO BAYOU NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA IN WEST HOUSTON, TEXAS.

July 17, 2001

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior's views on H. R. 1776. This bill would authorize the Secretary of the Interior to study the suitability and feasibility of establishing the Buffalo Bayou National Heritage Area in west Houston, Texas.

The Department supports this legislation, if amended to make the bill similar to previous national heritage area study bills. Nevertheless, we will not request funding for the study in this or the next fiscal year so as to focus available time and resources on completing previously authorized studies. As of now, there are 41 authorized studies that are pending, and we only expect to complete a few of those this year. We caution that our support of this legislation authorizing a study does not necessarily mean that the Department will support designation of this National Heritage Area. The Administration is determined to eliminate the deferred maintenance backlog in national parks, but the costs of new parks or other commitments, such as grants for new National Heritage Areas, could divert funds from taking care of current responsibilities. Furthermore, in order to better plan for the future of our National Parks, we believe that any such studies should carefully examine the full life cycle operation and maintenance costs that would result from each alternative considered.

H. R. 1776 outlines the characteristics and qualities of the Buffalo Bayou area in Houston, Texas including the history and role of the Bayou in the creation and development of the city. The bill authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a suitability and feasibility study to determine if the area known as Buffalo Bayou in Houston, Texas could be designated as a national heritage area. The legislation authorizes \$200,000 in Fiscal Year 2002 to fund the study, with a report due to Congress describing the results of the study.

The National Park Service has not had extensive involvement in the Houston area. However, the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA) has worked with the Buffalo Bayou Partnership and other local groups to establish a 5 mile rail-trail that runs parallel to the Bayou. Through that work, and from brief reviews of planning documents and activities surrounding the Bayou, it is clear that this area of Houston was central to the creation of the city. The Bayou has now become a focal point for downtown Houston, encouraging its residents to enjoy, use, and appreciate their great resources today as the city continues to renew and define itself.

It is also evident that the groups and communities in the area value their heritage and open space and are looking for ways to maintain and enhance these qualities. A study that looks at the natural, cultural, and recreational significance and values of the area could make recommendations on the best method to protect and use these resources while retaining the character of this part of Houston.

As we have testified previously before this subcommittee, there are several steps we believe should be taken prior to Congress designating a national heritage area to help ensure that the heritage area is successful. Those steps are:

1. completion of a suitability/feasibility study;

2. public involvement in the suitability/feasibility study;
3. demonstration of widespread public support among heritage area residents for the proposed designation; and
4. commitment to the proposal from the appropriate players which may include governments, industry, and private, non-profit organizations, in addition to the local citizenry.

H. R. 1776 and previous work in the community demonstrates the commitment to the idea of pursuing a study to look at further protection and preservation options. It is also apparent that there is widespread support for the Buffalo Bayou that will ensure public involvement. A critical element of the study will be to evaluate the integrity of the resources and the nationally distinctive character of the region before recommending national heritage area designation.

We would be happy to work with the subcommittee and the bill's sponsor, Representative Green, to amend the legislation so that it is similar to other bills that have authorized studies of national heritage areas. We have attached proposed amendments at the end of this testimony.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared remarks. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have.

Proposed Amendments

H. R. 1776, to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to study the suitability and feasibility of establishing the Buffalo Bayou National Heritage Area in west Houston, Texas.

On page 3, line 20 insert "the City of Houston, and other appropriate organizations" after "the State of Texas,".

On page 3, line 19 insert "(1)" before "The Secretary shall," and then insert a new paragraph (2) on page 3, line 23 as follows:

"(2) The study shall include analysis and documentation that the Study Area:

(A) has an assemblage of natural, historic, and cultural resources that together represent distinctive aspects of American heritage worthy of recognition, conservation, interpretation, and continuing use, and are best managed through partnerships among public and private entities and by combining diverse and sometimes noncontiguous resources and active communities;

(B) reflects traditions, customs, beliefs, and folklife that are a valuable part of the national story;

(C) provides outstanding opportunities to conserve natural, historic, cultural, and/or scenic features;

(D) provides outstanding recreational and educational opportunities;

(E) contains resources important to the identified theme or themes of the Study Area that retain a degree of integrity capable of supporting interpretation;

(F) includes residents, business interests, non-profit organizations, and local and state governments who are involved in the planning, have developed a conceptual financial plan that outlines the roles for all participants including the federal government, and have demonstrated support for the concept of a national heritage area;

(G) has a potential management entity to work in partnership with residents, business interests, non-profit organizations, and local and state governments to develop a national heritage area consistent with continued local and state economic activity; and

(H) has a conceptual boundary map that is supported by the public."

On page 3, line 23 through page 4, line 2 strike Section 2(c) and replace with the following:

"(c) BOUNDARIES OF THE STUDY AREA.—The Study Area shall be comprised of sites in Houston, Texas, in an area roughly bounded by Shepherd Drive and extending to the Turning Basin, commonly referred to as the Buffalo Bayou."

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