

February 14, 2024

Honorable Senator Joe Manchin III

Chairman

U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
306 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Senator Angus King, Jr.

Chairman

Subcommittee on National Parks
U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
133 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Senator John Barrasso

Ranking Member

U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
307 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Senator Steve Daines

Ranking Member

Subcommittee on National Parks
U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
320 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC, 20510

Honorable Chairmen and Ranking Members,

On behalf of the Development of Houston County Board of Directors, I am writing to support the swift passage of legislation to create the Ocmulgee Mounds National Park and Preserve in the 118th Congress, to express gratitude for the federal efforts to meet this moment after almost a century of civic advocacy, and to acknowledge that we are committed to continuing to fulfill the vision of this Park and Preserve.

The Ocmulgee River is a special place, recognized by the National Park Service as one of America's most important and significant wildlife habitat corridors, tribally significant landscapes, and archaeological sites with the opportunity of creating the first and only National Park and Preserve in Georgia. The legislation to create the Park and Preserve unit is carefully tailored to the recommendations of the National Park Service's Special Resource Study and has broad local support across varying fields, interests, and political ideologies.

Conserving the series of ecological and cultural assets as a National Park and Preserve is vital to the region. It will serve as a robust form of long term and stable economic development for the Middle Georgia region, enhance climate resilience for local ecosystems by preserving biodiversity hotspots, which are most effective in larger contiguous landscapes, offer an avenue for co-management between the tribal, state and federal land managers, and constitute one of the largest potential expansions of public hunting and fishing access in Georgia.

The Muscogee (Creek) Nation has been in consultation with the National Historical Park for years due to the significance of the ancestral sites inside the proposed boundary. But as landowners in the corridor as well their long-standing commitment to the stewardship of the corridor, common practices of co-management at other units around the country, this Park and Preserve legislation would create a path toward co-management to be agreed upon by all land managers.

In addition to the Muscogee (Creek) cultural sites, the wildlife habitat along the Ocmulgee has also remained unspoiled. The opportunity for connectivity is uniquely possible because so many private and public parcels are already protected along the corridor. Included is the 6,500-acre Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, part of roughly 85,000 acres of contiguous swamp, the largest block of forested habitat in the upper coastal plain. The park sits on the banks of the Ocmulgee River on the Macon Plateau along the Fall Line, the edge of a prehistoric sea and geological boundary that separates the hills of the Piedmont and the flatlands of the Atlantic coastal plain.

Further, the economic impact of the park and preserve cannot be overstated. A study conducted by the National Parks Conservation Association estimates that the proposed National Park and Preserve will have a tremendous economic impact along the corridor. The study estimates that over the course of 15 years the region's municipalities can expect a collective increase in tax revenue annually of \$29.8 Million because of the projected \$206.7 Million of total economic activity generated from the Park and Preserve.

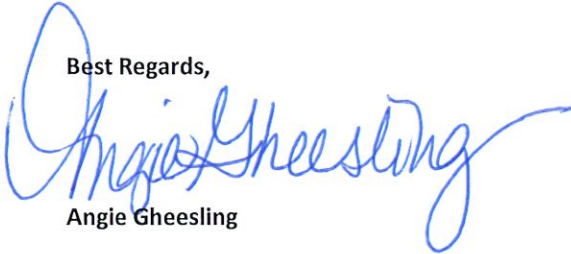
Lastly, one of the key economic engines of Middle Georgia is Robins Air Force Base (RAFB) in Warner Robins. This Park and Preserve will potentially offer a quality of life increase for the communities housed on base and the live in the region. It will also allow partners to put land along the Ocmulgee flood plain near the base into conservation, helping stave off encroachment into flight pattern areas. Future development in the areas east of the base is important to protect against incompatible land use. Conserving undeveloped lands within the Ocmulgee River Corridor will help the base continue to fulfill our national security missions, which is vital to the economic vitality of the entire Middle Georgia region.

Land abutting Robins AFB is vacant and mostly undeveloped. Legislation creating the National Park and Preserve will potentially allow RAFB, and park partners to leverage the Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program to protect the environs inside their REPI boundary and inside the expanded Preserve boundary. It is for this reason that the Sustainability Plan for RAFB formally recommends the creation of the National Park and Preserve.

To continue the robust effort of creating full connectivity of the corridor, we fully support the passage of legislation during the 118th Congress to establish and create the first and only National Park and Preserve in Georgia. By protecting this landscape, working with the Muscogee (Creek) Nation as co-managers of their ancestral homeland, preserving the diverse wildlife habitat, protecting and increasing access to public hunting, fishing, and wildlife habitat, and increases name recognition and thereby national and international prominence of this treasure, this legislation will finally allow the Middle Georgia, local and national conservationist, the hunting and angling, and Muscogee (Creek) communities to preserve the corridor for generations to come.

As stewards of the corridor, it is up to us to fulfill the vision of a fully connected and conserved corridor, but we cannot continue to do so without swift federal action from Congress. That is why we support the passage of federal legislation in the 118th Congress. Every year that goes by without action, we risk future development, lost cultural sites, and missed opportunities for significant economic development in the beloved region of Middle Georgia. As a region and partnership, we have been preparing for this moment and are ready to rise to the challenge of filling the proposed boundary.

Best Regards,



Angie Gheesling

Executive Director



Houston
Development Authority

Let's Reconnect. We are Houston.

Be Houston.

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