

GAOA Testimony

Cole McCaskill

Welcome to all of our distinguished guests. And thank you for being here. On behalf of Hot Springs, we are so proud to have Hot Springs National Park in our front yard and Ouachita National Forest in our backyard. These are world class institutions, and they always look as nice as they do today.

If this is your first trip to Hot Springs, it doesn't take long to figure out that our national park is quite a bit different than most. The first question most visitors ask about the park is where is the entrance?

Hot Springs National Park and the City of Hot Springs are intertwined. They both grew up together. It's a symbiotic relationship.

I cannot overstate how influential public lands are on the economy of Hot Springs. Let's look just at Hot Springs National Park for a moment. 2.5 million visitors. It's the second smallest national park by area but the 15th most visited. 2.5 million visitors bring with them demand for goods and services. The national park provides for some of that demand, but it can't provide the lion's share. People need lodging, food, shopping, entertainment, transportation, parking, souvenirs. Did you even visit a national park if you didn't get a fridge magnet?

The tourist hierarchy of needs are lodging, food, and fridge magnets. And if you're in Hot Springs National Park- water jugs. The water is special. We are all here because of the water.

2.5 million visitors creates a tremendous demand and the businesses of Hot Springs and the city of Hot Springs and Garland County meet that demand. They provide that infrastructure for tourism. Downtown business employees are frontline ambassadors for the national park. National Park employees give personal referrals for businesses in the town.

I've been in economic development for thirteen years. In this industry, we know that investment and job creation is what makes the world go round. We also know that private investment follows public investment. The Great American Outdoors Act is policy that promises that public investment.

We've had an incredible amount of growth in the last twelve years. 260 new businesses have opened downtown and \$230 million has been invested downtown. Central Ave. was named one of the ten best streets in America. Much of that downtown growth was to meet growing tourism demand.

It hasn't always been wonderful. Bathing demand declined in the mid 1900's and all but one of the bathhouses closed for decades. Then, like every other town in America, commerce completely left downtown when the shopping mall opened and for years, downtown and Hot Springs national park struggled- together. In the 1980's things got to a low point and there were threatening discussions about the future of Hot Springs National Park. Thankfully, the National Park Service invested in our park and that public investment spurred private investment and we now have this thriving park and downtown economy we are all so proud of.

What a novel idea, invest in our community and business will be the result.

A wise man once said, "Build it and they will come."

Well, if you call it a national park, they will come.

I'm a national park junkie. I've been to a few. Not to brag or anything but I have a park pass. I've witnessed the national park phenomena at all the ones I've visited. Most parks are very remote and after hours of driving- all of a sudden, you come upon a town and you know the park entrance is close. Estes Park, Colorado, Springdale, Utah, Gatlinburg, TN, Hot Springs, AR. Businesses and cities providing that tourism infrastructure. Without it, the visitor experience would be a disaster. The park cant provide everything for millions of visitors.

I've talked a lot about the national park, but the Ouachita National Forest is an incredible asset. Outdoor recreation is having a real moment. Hiking and mountain biking are growing in popularity every day. In the Ouachita National Forest, we have three Epic Trails designated by the International Mountain Biking Association. There's only 53 Epics in the entire world. We have three in one other county. There's not another county in the United States that has more than one.

We're so proud of our public lands.

The bottom line is if we want to grow, we have to invest, and we need to grow- because it's a heck of a lot better than the alternative.