

Testimony of Representative Mike Johnson

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Legislative Hearing on H.R. 149, H.R. 250, H.R. 3197, H.R. 3531, H.R. 4009, H.R. 4380, H.R. 4454, H.R. 4648, & H.R. 4706

October 14, 2021

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Fulcher, and members of the subcommittee. I'm proud to have two bills on the docket for this hearing. First is H.R. 3197, the *Save the Liberty Theatre Act*. The Liberty Theatre is located in my district in Eunice, Louisiana, and it has been a staple of Louisiana's Cajun community for nearly 100 years. It has hosted famed Cajun musicians and served as an important center of culture and tourism not only for the Eunice community, but for all of south Louisiana.

For years, the theatre worked hand in hand with the neighboring Prairie Acadian Cultural Center that's operated by the National Park Service. Through this partnership, the Park Service and the City of Eunice were able to organize and carry out various cultural events that showcased the unique Louisiana heritage that so many people embrace.

Because the Park Service and the Liberty Theatre facilities share the same city block, each assumed certain maintenance and upkeep responsibilities that were mutually beneficial. Unfortunately, because of funding constraints, this shared responsibility was unable to continue and a memorandum of understanding between the two parties was terminated. There is still the opportunity for the Park Service and the theatre to collaborate on various events, but they simply no longer share in the upkeep and maintenance responsibilities of the two facilities.

And the cost of upkeep for the Liberty Theatre is considerable. Moreover, the building is in need of some extensive renovations and restoration. A group of local stakeholders has begun outreach to raise the funds necessary to bring the theatre back to its former glory, but a problem remains regarding the National Park Service's ownership interest in an annex to the theatre that allows disabled individuals to access the facility.

This ownership interest of the Park Service has made it somewhat difficult to secure restoration dollars given that some believe that interest brings red tape that could slow the process. My bill remedies this problem by directing the Secretary of Interior to convey the Park Service's ownership interest of the annex to the City of Eunice. This will give the city full ownership of the theatre and the annex, and it will allow the community to move forward with their restoration efforts.

We've worked closely with the Park Service on this bill, and while they haven't issued a formal statement on their position, they have reviewed the text and deem it technically sufficient and have no suggested edits. We have full community support—you'll hear from the Mayor of Eunice on this issue in a separate panel. This is a straightforward issue that has a simple solution, so I thank you for scheduling it for today's hearing, and I look forward to working with you as the process continues.

My other bill on the calendar today is H.R. 4648, the *Cane River Creole National Historical Park Boundary Modification Act*. As the title indicates, this bill will adjust the boundary of the Cane River Creole National Historical Park in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana to accommodate a historically and culturally significant piece of property and make it part of the historical park.

By way of background, the park was created in 1994 to commemorate the mix of cultures related to settlement in Louisiana's Red River Valley. The park consists of two existing units—Oakland Plantation and Magnolia Plantation. Both are National Historic Landmarks and National Bicentennial Farms. They were owned by the same family for over 200 years, and through Park Service programs, they tell the story of slavery and African American history in the region.

Importantly, however, when the land was originally donated to the Park Service in 1997, the donors only included certain outbuildings, and several remaining structures remained in private ownership by the descendants of the original landowners. In August of last year, the family contacted the Park Service about donating the remaining property for incorporation into the park. As I said previously, this new donation includes culturally and historically significant structures that will enhance the visitor experience and paint a clearer picture of the history of the Red River Valley.

The Park's superintendent has received correspondence from all concerned parties expressing a desire to transfer their interest in the privately held properties to the Park Service. This proposed transfer has received support from state and local

leaders and various organizations such as the Sabine Parish Tourist Commission, City of Natchitoches Planning and Zoning Department, Natchitoches Historic Commission, Louisiana Trust for Historic Preservation and many more.

Rebecca Blankenbaker is the Executive Director of the Cane River National Heritage Area. We've worked closely with her on this bill, and I'm confident she can further attest to the significant amount of local stakeholder support for the legislation when she appears on a later panel.

In closing, I'd just like to thank the Chairman and Ranking Member once again for including two bills in today's hearing that are extremely important to my constituents. I'm looking forward to working with you to advance them both, and I yield back.