

Testimony of Casey Claypool, Executive Director, Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway

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Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands - HR 3600

Good afternoon, Chair Neguse and Ranking Member Fulcher. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss House Bill 3600 – designating Route 66 a National Historic Trail.

My name is Casey Claypool, I am Executive Director of the Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway. In 2005, Illinois Route 66 was designated a National Scenic Byway because of the work completed by the Illinois Route 66 Heritage Project, Inc. The Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway was then formed, and we now work to enhance and promote economic opportunities for Illinois Route 66 communities by preserving Route 66 heritage and sustaining and increasing cultural tourism. We serve more than 90 communities from Chicago to the Chain of Rocks Bridge near Madison, Illinois.

My testimony today, comes at an exciting time. With the 95th birthday of Route 66 just a few days away, the designation of Route 66 would not only be an incredible birthday gift, but it would also launch our historic road into a category of awareness that will assist its supporters in preservation and promotion as well as enhance economic development efforts in the future.

In 1999, Congress passed an Act to create the Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program which was administered by the National Park Service to preserve the special places and stories of this historic road. This program expired in 2019 and the next step in sustaining preservation and other significant efforts along Route 66 would be the passage of this bill. The impact of Route 66 to American heritage, cultural tourism and economic development is not something that should be abandoned; this designation is vital to the future of the people and communities Route 66 serves and the overwhelming number of travelers from around the world who seek out this historic road.

Each year, tens of thousands of visitors spend millions of dollars to traverse Route 66. Domestic and international travelers are in search of the nostalgia and historic character that Route 66 provides. Now, almost 95 years old, the 2,400-mile highway from Chicago to Los Angeles remains an economic force not only for Illinois tourism, but tourism across the other seven states it spans. However, promotion and preservation are still ongoing challenges, and economic development resources are still limited.

Organizations like the Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway have worked hard to increase the resources and partnerships statewide, but awareness is still deficient. This designation would help increase awareness and provide a permanent program to preserve, promote, and economically revitalize Route 66.

A National Historic Trail portrays an image of our nation's diverse history; Route 66 embodies everything a National Historic Trail should. Shortly after World War II, America witnessed a major change in culture. People began to move and travel outside of their communities. Personal automobiles made travel and exploration easier and more affordable, and Route 66 made the freedom of the road attainable.

Route 66 was decommissioned in 1985, however, its capacity to inspire discovery and instill optimism did not end. The road is still alive with commerce, nostalgia, and inspiration, but as time passes, the ability to raise awareness and emphasize historic importance diminishes. Designating Route 66 as a National Historic Trail will ensure the road remains one of the most popular driving destinations in the world.

Driving Route 66 retraces the past by experiencing its heritage, culture, and the stories it has to tell. The simple experience of driving the road, taking in the landscape, witnessing the charm and uniqueness of the communities that line the road, and meeting the diverse people the road supports, is at the heart of many Route 66 experiences.

Today, Route 66 remains a remarkable road, and its historic significance cannot be disputed. Route 66 is far-reaching, stretching from Chicago to Santa Monica, it provides not only a way to navigate history, but also a way to support the people and businesses that provide economic development for their communities.

In closing, I believe designating Route 66 as a National Historic Trail will help preserve and promote the road itself as well as increase economic development opportunities for the communities that have long supported its cultural heritage, intrinsic qualities, and idiosyncratic character. A National Historic Designation will enable Route 66 communities to thrive and allow them to continue to tell the compelling story of the road and the freedom and values that embrace it.

