

Testimony of Gary Wheat

**President & CEO
Visit Macon**

Before the House Committee on Natural Resources

Regarding H.R. 9416 – Ocmulgee Mounds National Park Designation

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Members and distinguished Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of H.R. 9416, the redesignation of Ocmulgee Mounds as America's 64th National Park and the first for the state of Georgia. I am Gary Wheat, President & Chief Executive Officer of Visit Macon, the destination management and tourism organization of Macon-Bibb County, Georgia.

I come before you not as a historian or archaeologist, but as someone whose responsibility is helping communities grow, businesses succeed, and families build better futures through economic opportunity.

From that perspective, I can say without hesitation that this legislation represents one of the most significant economic development opportunities in Georgia's modern history.

For nearly one hundred years, the people of Middle Georgia have believed Ocmulgee deserved recognition as one of America's great places. What began in 1934 as a local vision has become a bipartisan movement supported by a broad coalition of advocates and stewards to the 17,000 years of continuous human habitation preserved at Ocmulgee Mounds. Our partners now include the State of Georgia, Macon-Bibb County Government, the Macon and Georgia Chambers of Commerce, Active and Civilian leadership of Robins Air Force Base, all 20 municipalities that make up the Middle Georgia Regional Commission, the Ocmulgee Mounds National Park Initiative, national and local conservation organizations, tribal nations, and the Georgia Mining Association.

Georgia is the largest state east of the Mississippi River without a National Park. Every year millions of Americans plan vacations around our National Parks, generating billions of dollars for local communities. Yet Georgia—a state rich in American history, outdoor recreation, and cultural heritage—has never had the opportunity to fully participate in that economy.

H.R. 9416 changes that.

For generations of Georgians, this has been a dream. Today, it is an achievable opportunity.

Independent economic analysis estimates that National Park designation could ultimately attract an additional 1.3 million visitors to Middle Georgia every year. Those visitors are projected to generate approximately \$233 million in annual economic activity, create as many as 3,100 new jobs, and produce nearly \$34 million in additional annual tax revenue.

These are not abstract projections. They represent hotel rooms filled by traveling families; meals purchased in locally owned restaurants; small businesses opening their doors; construction jobs building new attractions; young professionals choosing to remain in our community because opportunity exists here instead of somewhere else.

For Middle Georgia, those numbers translate into careers, expanded tax revenue, stronger entrepreneurship, and a higher quality of life.

With support from the Knight Foundation, we have completed a regional destination development strategy designed specifically to maximize the economic return of National Park designation while protecting the character and authenticity that make this place special.

Through the vision of local leadership, over \$500 million in tourism infrastructure is being developed with Ocmulgee Mounds acting as the catalyst in the region's transition to a tourism economy. Tourism and economic development initiatives between Macon organizations and the Muscogee (Creek) Nation have led to joint board representation, historical curation and economic development plans. Regional land acquisition has ensured the land surrounding the Park will be conserved and protected for future generations of visitors.

This would also bolster our region's economic engine and one of our country's most vital installations in the pursuit of National Security, Robins Air Force Base. Their recent sustainability plan conducted by the Department of Defense recommended the passage of this legislation stating, *"the creation of a new national park and preserve adjacent to or near the Installation could protect lands neighboring the Installation, prevent encroachment, and preserve Installation operational areas and neighboring land use compatibility."*

Recent Ocmulgee Park visitation increases have played a vital role in Macon rolling back property taxes by 50%. This Congressional re-designation will continue to result in the ongoing largest property tax cut in middle Georgia history.

Simply put, the groundwork has already been laid. Congress is not being asked to create an opportunity. Congress is being asked to unlock one that decades of local investment have already prepared.

National Park is the most recognized destination brand in the world. It encourages private investment. It strengthens rural economies. It is an opportunity to tell one of America's oldest stories while creating one of Georgia's brightest futures.

This effort also demonstrates something increasingly rare in public life.

It has united people who do not always agree.

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, our region has spent nearly a century preparing for this moment.

We have built the partnerships.

We have invested the resources.

We have demonstrated the local commitment.

Congress is not being asked to imagine what this designation could become—it is being asked to recognize what Middle Georgia has already built. We respectfully ask for your support of H.R. 9416 so Georgia can welcome its first National Park, creating lasting economic opportunity for our communities and preserving one of America's oldest stories for generations to come.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome your questions.