

Written Testimony for the Record (H.R. 5470)

Testimony of:

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Before the:

Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
Legislative Hearing on H.R. 5470, the “Route 66 National Historic Trail Designation Act”
September 2, 2026

Chairman Westerman, Ranking Member Huffman, and Members of the Committee:
Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 5470, the “Route 66 National Historic Trail Designation Act,” which would amend the National Trails System Act to designate the Route 66 National Historic Trail.

My name is William M. Thomas. I serve as Chairman of the Route 66 Road Ahead Partnership, a national nonprofit that collaborates with communities, businesses, tribal nations, preservationists, and state and federal agencies to preserve, promote, and economically revitalize Route 66. I also serve on the U.S. Route 66 Centennial Commission, established by Congress to plan and coordinate activities in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Route 66 in 2026.

I offer this testimony to convey three key points:

- Route 66 is a nationally significant historic resource.
- National Historic Trail designation, as set out in H.R. 5470, is the right and appropriate tool for recognizing and protecting it.
- This designation will support economic development—especially in small, rural, and tribal communities—at modest federal cost and with clear protections for property rights and existing land-use authorities.

I. National Historic Significance of Route 66

Commissioned in 1926, Route 66 extended approximately 2,400 miles from Chicago, Illinois, to Santa Monica, California, crossing eight states and more than 300 communities. It is one of the most recognizable and culturally resonant roads in the world.

Route 66 is nationally significant because it tells critical stories about the American experience, including:

Migration and resilience

During the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, Route 66 became a “road of flight and hope” as hundreds of thousands of Americans traveled west seeking work and survival. John Steinbeck famously called it the “Mother Road” in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

World War II and defense mobilization

The highway was a major corridor for the movement of troops, equipment, and supplies, and for wartime industrial expansion in the Southwest and on the West Coast.

Postwar prosperity, tourism, and automobile culture

Route 66 fostered the development of motels, diners, service stations, and roadside attractions that shaped America’s mid-20th-century travel and leisure patterns.

Civil rights and social change

The history of Route 66 includes sites related to segregation and the “Green Book,” as well as later efforts at integration and equal access to public accommodations.

Native American and multicultural heritage

Route 66 passes through or near numerous tribal communities and diverse immigrant neighborhoods, reflecting an array of cultural traditions, arts, and enterprises that continue today.

In short, Route 66 is a living, linear record of 20th-century American history—transportation, economics, architecture, migration, popular culture, and social change.

H.R. 5470 appropriately captures this scope by designating “all the alignments of U.S. Highway 66 in existence between 1926 and 1985,” as depicted on the National Park Service map “Route 66 National Historic Trail, Proposed Route.”

II. Why National Historic Trail Designation in H.R. 5470 Is Appropriate

Congress created the National Trails System to recognize, preserve, and interpret nationally significant historic routes that tell the stories of our nation. Route 66 clearly meets the criteria for a National Historic Trail:

- It is nationally significant, as described above.
- It has substantial length and geographic scope, crossing eight states and linking multiple regions, cultures, and landscapes.
- Its resources—historic alignments, bridges, motels, gas stations, main streets, tribal sites, and landscapes—are directly associated with historic events and themes central to the development of the United States in the 20th century.

H.R. 5470 would add Route 66 to the list of National Historic Trails in section 5(a) of the National Trails System Act. The bill does several important things that I strongly support:

Provides clear federal recognition and coordination

The bill directs that the Route 66 National Historic Trail be administered by the Secretary of the Interior, acting through the Director of the National Park Service, and specifies that this administration be conducted in a manner that “respects and maintains the idiosyncratic nature” of Route 66. This is critical: Route 66 is a rich mix of local businesses, architecture, and landscapes, and the bill recognizes that any federal role must work with—rather than standardize or override—that character.

Respects Tribal sovereignty and requires consultation

Section ©(ii) requires “active, meaningful, and timely” consultation with affected Indian Tribes, consistent with Executive Order 13175 and other applicable federal law, before undertaking activities that would have substantial direct impacts on one or more Tribes. Route 66 crosses or affects numerous tribal lands and communities; this consultation requirement is both appropriate and necessary.

Uses a voluntary, partnership-based approach to land and resources

The bill carefully limits federal land acquisition authority—requiring landowner consent for acquisitions outside federally managed areas, restricting any acquisition to an average of one-quarter mile on either side of the trail, and expressly prohibiting the use of eminent domain or condemnation. These provisions align with how Route 66 has historically been preserved: through voluntary partnerships, incentives, and local leadership, not federal mandates.

In addition, H.R. 5470 explicitly addresses concerns that often arise with federal designations:

- Section (E) clarifies that the designation does not create buffer zones, and that activities outside the trail are not to be controlled simply because they can be seen or heard from the trail.

- Section (F) ensures that the designation does not prohibit, hinder, or disrupt existing or future energy development, production, transportation, or transmission, including pipelines and renewable energy projects.
- Section (H) makes clear that this designation does not turn the trail into “lands in the National Park System” for purposes of the Mineral Leasing Act.
- Section (I) confirms that the designation does not alter existing authority to grant easements or rights-of-way across the area of the trail and does not subject the trail corridor to new federal permitting requirements that would otherwise not apply.

From my perspective working with communities along Route 66, these provisions strike an appropriate and practical balance. They provide national recognition, interpretive coordination, and modest federal assistance, while preserving local control, private property rights, and the ability of other public and private entities to continue their existing and future land uses.

III. Economic and Community Benefits, Especially in Rural and Tribal Areas

Route 66 has already proven to be a powerful engine for heritage tourism and economic renewal, particularly in small towns, rural communities, and tribal nations that have lost other economic bases.

Independent studies and state tourism data indicate that:

- Route 66 attracts visitors from all 50 states and from around the world—especially Europe, Asia, and Australia—who frequently travel the road specifically because of its history and iconography.
- These visitors often stay longer and spend more than average travelers, because their primary purpose is to explore local communities, historic sites, and small businesses along the route.
- Heritage travelers patronize locally owned motels, diners, trading posts, museums, and cultural centers—putting money directly into main streets and small enterprises that are otherwise easily bypassed by the interstate system.

Through the Route 66 Road Ahead Partnership and in collaboration with state and local partners, we have seen that:

- Preservation and tourism create jobs in hospitality, construction, food service, retail, and the creative sector—often in communities where new job opportunities are otherwise scarce.
- Tribal communities along Route 66 are developing cultural centers, arts markets, and interpretive programming that share Native stories, history, and contemporary life with visitors.
- Small-town main streets are being revitalized by restoring neon signs, historic theaters, gas stations, and cafes, which serve as anchors of community identity and visitor attractions.
- By designating Route 66 as a National Historic Trail, H.R. 5470 will:
- Increase the visibility and marketability of Route 66 as a premier heritage tourism destination, particularly as we approach the 2026 Centennial.
- Strengthen the ability of communities to leverage private investment, state and local tourism funds, and grant programs, many of which give priority to nationally recognized historic routes.
- Help ensure that economic benefits are widely and fairly shared, including in communities of color and tribal nations whose stories are integral to the Route 66 experience.

These benefits come at a modest federal cost because the physical road and most associated resources already exist, and there is a well-developed network of local, state, tribal, and nonprofit partners ready to collaborate with the National Park Service.

IV. Alignment with the Route 66 Centennial and Prior Congressional Action

Congress has already recognized the importance of Route 66 through prior studies and legislation directing the National Park Service to examine preservation strategies for the route and the establishment of the U.S. Route 66 Centennial Commission, on which I serve, to guide national commemorations in 2026 and to highlight the road’s historical and cultural significance.

H.R. 5470 is a logical and timely next step that aligns with this congressional direction. The upcoming 100th anniversary will attract increased public attention, media coverage, and visitation. National Historic Trail status will help ensure that this moment leads to lasting benefits in preservation, education, and community development, rather than being a one-time celebration.

V. Conclusion

As Chairman of the Route 66 Road Ahead Partnership and a member of the U.S. Route 66 Centennial Commission, I can attest that there is broad, bipartisan support among communities, businesses, tribal nations, preservation organizations, and travelers for recognizing Route 66 as a National Historic Trail through H.R. 5470.

This legislation will:

- Honor a unique and irreplaceable part of America's heritage.
- Provide a proven, flexible framework for preservation and interpretation tailored to Route 66's distinctive, "idiosyncratic" character.
- Support sustainable, locally driven economic development along a corridor that binds together eight states, hundreds of communities, and countless personal stories—while clearly protecting private property rights, tribal sovereignty, and existing authorities related to energy development and rights-of-way.

I respectfully urge the Committee and the House of Representatives to advance H.R. 5470, the Route 66 National Historic Trail Designation Act.

Thank you for your consideration of my testimony and for your leadership in preserving our nation's historic and cultural resources. I would be pleased to answer any questions.

Onward and upward,
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