

STATEMENT OF P. DANIEL SMITH, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, EXERCISING THE AUTHORITY OF THE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, CONCERNING H.R. 4895 AND S. 2889, TO ESTABLISH THE MEDGAR EVERS HOME NATIONAL MONUMENT IN THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

AUGUST 15, 2018

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to provide the Department of the Interior's views on H.R. 4895 and S. 2889, bills to establish the Medgar Evers Home National Monument in the State of Mississippi, and for other purposes.

The Department supports enactment of H.R. 4895 and S. 2889 with amendments described later in this statement. As a nationally significant civil rights site, where the owner has indicated a desire to donate the property for inclusion in the National Park System, the Medgar Evers Home represents an exceptional opportunity to preserve and interpret for future generations one of the most crucial stories of the African American civil rights movement of the mid-20th Century.

H.R. 4895 and S. 2889 would authorize the Secretary of the Interior to establish the Medgar Evers Home National Monument after meeting specified requirements. The proposed boundary of the monument includes land within the Medgar Evers National Register District and the Medgar and Myrlie Evers National Historic Landmark. The bills include authorities for land acquisition and administration that are commonly included in legislation establishing a unit of the National Park System.

Medgar Wiley Evers was born in 1925 in Decatur, Mississippi. He was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1943, fought in both France and Germany during World War II, and received an honorable discharge in 1946. His wife, Myrlie Beasley, was born in 1933 and grew up in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Medgar and Myrlie met while enrolled as students at Alcorn College in Lorman, Mississippi. They were married in 1951 and had three children: Darrell, Reena, and James.

Medgar and Myrlie Evers were major contributors to advancing the goals of the civil rights movement by combining local, grassroots strategies in Mississippi with national organization efforts to change laws and policies related to voting rights, public education, and public accommodations. Medgar Evers was the first Mississippi field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and was at the forefront of every major civil rights event in Mississippi from 1955 until his assassination in 1963. He traveled constantly to work on voter registration drives around the state; investigated the murders of African Americans such as Emmett Till, George Lee, and others; worked behind the scenes with James Meredith and Clyde Kennard to integrate Mississippi's white universities; and was involved in direct action campaigns such as the beach wade-ins on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the library read-ins and the economic boycott of downtown Jackson.

While Medgar was the public face of the NAACP in Mississippi, Myrlie Evers worked behind the scenes running the NAACP field office in Jackson, drafting speeches, and providing personal and logistical support for her husband and other civil rights workers. After her husband's death, Myrlie took on a public, active role in the civil rights movement. Soon after his funeral, she began speaking at NAACP events across the nation, eventually becoming the first woman to chair the board of the NAACP from 1995 to 1998.

The assassination of Medgar Evers on June 12, 1963, in the carport of the couple's home was the first murder of a civil rights leader that focused national attention on the civil rights movement. His death heightened public awareness throughout the United States of civil rights issues and became one of the catalysts for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The Evers family donated their home to Tougaloo College in 1993. Located in Jackson's Elaine Subdivision, it is listed in the National Register of Historic Places as the first post-World War II subdivision created for middle-class African Americans in Mississippi. Restored by the College, the home is operated as a museum commemorating the life of Medgar and Myrlie Evers. Guided tours of the house are available to the public by appointment. The Medgar and Myrlie Evers Home, located within the Medgar Evers Historic District on the National Register of Historic Places, was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 2016. On August 3, 2018, Secretary Ryan Zinke added the Medgar and Myrlie Evers home to the U.S. Civil Rights Network to further recognize its significance in the history of the African American civil rights movement.

The National Park Service is in the process of conducting a Congressionally authorized special resource study of Mississippi's nationally significant civil rights sites, including the Evers home and many of the locations Medgar investigated during his work with the NAACP. Strong local support for including the home in the National Park System has been indicated through public meetings and comments. Tougaloo College, which owns the home, is prepared to donate the property for inclusion in the proposed unit. All funding for the unit would be subject to National Park Service priorities and the availability of appropriations.

The Department recommends that S. 3176 and H.R. 5979 be amended in the following ways:

First, H.R. 4895 and S. 2889 would name the site the "Medgar Evers Home National Monument". The Department recommends adding Myrlie's name to make it the "Medgar and Myrlie Evers Home National Monument". This amendment would provide recognition for Myrlie's own important contributions to furthering the advancement of the civil rights movement, and it would make the name consistent with the National Historic Landmark designation.

Second, the bills include two conditions for establishing the Medgar Evers Home as a unit of the National Park System: (1) entering into an agreement for donation of the property, and (2) acquiring sufficient land to constitute a manageable unit. Because land must be acquired prior to the establishment of the Monument, an agreement evidencing an intent to donate land is a precondition that does not need to be included in the legislation. We therefore recommend striking the first condition.

Third, the bills require the National Park Service to enter into a cooperative agreement with Tougaloo College for interpretive and educational programming related to the national monument. The Department recommends amending the bills to allow flexibility for the National Park Service and Tougaloo College to determine the best way to work in partnership to further the purposes of the new unit rather than requiring a specific type of agreement for a specific purpose.

Fourth, the bills provides land acquisition authority by means of donation, purchase with donated funds, or exchange. The Department recommends amending the bill to also include the authority to purchase lands with appropriated funds. Such authority is common for other National Park Service units. That authority would allow the owners of private property within the boundary the opportunity to sell their lands to the Federal government. Even if the owners are not interested in selling their land at the current time, this authority provides the flexibility for them to make that decision in the future if circumstances change. Before the National Park Service would seek to acquire any property, whether by purchase, donation, or exchange, it would take into consideration the condition of any structures on the property that would add to the Service's deferred maintenance backlog. Any funding to purchase land would be subject to future appropriations from Congress.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.