

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL A. CALDWELL, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, PARK PLANNING, FACILITIES, AND LANDS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, CONCERNING S. 507, A BILL TO ESTABLISH THE RALPH DAVID ABERNATHY, SR. NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE AS A UNIT OF THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

JUNE 21, 2023

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide the Department of the Interior's views on S. 507, a bill to establish the Ralph David Abernathy, Sr. National Historic Site as a unit of the National Park System, and for other purposes.

The Department supports S. 507.

S. 507 would authorize the Secretary of the Interior to establish the Ralph David Abernathy, Sr. National Historic Site at the historic West Hunter Street Baptist Church in Atlanta as a unit of the National Park System after meeting specified requirements. The bill includes authorities for land acquisition and administration that are commonly included in legislation establishing a unit of the National Park System.

The legislation is based on the recommendations of the National Park Service's special resource study of the West Hunter Street Baptist Church, transmitted to Congress on March 21, 2022. The study found that the Church met the criteria for national significance for its close association with Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, Sr. As a result of findings that the site met all the criteria necessary to be considered appropriate for addition to the National Park System, the Department recommended that Congress consider establishing the site as a unit of the National Park System.

Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, Sr., was a key civil rights strategist and co-president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for whom he was also a friend and confidant. Following Dr. King's assassination in 1968, Rev. Abernathy became the SCLC president and championed important civil rights measures, such as Operation Breadbasket and the Poor People's Campaign. Over the course of his life, Abernathy organized economic justice and labor initiatives, served as a peace negotiator (including at Wounded Knee) and a goodwill ambassador.

Rev. Abernathy pastored Atlanta's West Hunter Street Baptist Church and performed critical aspects of his work there, earning the church recognition as "the spiritual workplace of the civil rights movement." The church served as a school for nonviolent protest initiatives, hosted civil rights leadership meetings, and provided spiritual sanctuary for countless civil rights activists.

Rev. Abernathy pastored from the Gothic Revival-style structure erected in 1906 and located at 775 Hunter Street (now Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive) prior to relocating the congregation in

1973. The historic structure represents an integral part of American and civil rights history not currently represented elsewhere within the National Park System. The church holds national significance as the location of important civil rights organizing throughout the modern civil rights movement. National Park Service (NPS) protection would highlight the work and legacy of Rev. Abernathy, as well as the important role of churches in the civil rights movement. Civic engagement in 2017, part of the special resource study process, demonstrated high public support for NPS management of the site, and the site possesses strong potential for public benefit, enjoyment, and inspiration.

Adding the Ralph David Abernathy, Sr. National Historic Site to the National Park System would provide the historic West Hunter Street Baptist Church site with long-term protection and allow the public to learn about Rev. Abernathy, the church and their respective roles in the modern civil rights movement.

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