

STATEMENT OF STEPHEN E. WHITESELL, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, PARK PLANNING, FACILITIES, AND LANDS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS, COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, CONCERNING H.R. 5131, TO ESTABLISH THE COLTSVILLE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

JUNE 10, 2010

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Department of the Interior regarding H.R. 5131, a bill to establish the Coltsville National Historical Park in Hartford, Connecticut.

The Department does not support enactment of this legislation due to the uncertainty associated with the ownership and long-term financial sustainability of the Coltsville development project as concluded by the National Park Service (NPS) in a special resource study of the resources associated with the Coltsville Historic District. In concert with this lack of feasibility, the study was also unable to determine the need for NPS management, or specifically which resources the NPS would manage.

The Secretary of the Interior (Secretary) designated Coltsville Historic District a National Historic Landmark on July 22, 2008. The manufacturing complex and associated resources constitute the site of nationally important contributions to manufacturing technology by Samuel Colt and the industrial enterprise he founded in 1855 – Colt’s Patent Firearms Manufacturing Company. It includes, among other resources, the armories where firearms and other products were made, the home of Samuel and Elizabeth Colt, Colt Park, and housing used by factory workers.

Samuel Colt is most renowned for developing a revolver design which revolutionized personal firearms. The Colt Peacemaker, a six-shot revolver, became known as “the gun that won the West.” Colt was a major innovator in the “American System” of precision manufacturing, replacing the practice of individually crafting each component of a product with the use of interchangeable parts. After his death in 1862, his wife Elizabeth owned and directed the manufacturing complex for 39 years, becoming a major entrepreneur in an age when women rarely occupied positions of importance in manufacturing.

During both World War I and World War II, the Colt Firearms Company was one of the nation’s leading small arms producers and made vital contributions to U.S. war efforts. The company applied its interchangeable-parts techniques to a wide variety of consumer products and the Colt complex became an “incubator” facility for other inventors and entrepreneurs. Coltsville is also noteworthy as a fully integrated industrial community that includes manufacturing facilities, employee housing, community buildings, and landscape features that were built largely under the personal direction of Samuel and Elizabeth Colt. Colt, whose labor practices were advanced for their time, attracted highly skilled laborers to his manufacturing enterprise.

H.R. 5131 provides that the Secretary shall not establish a unit of the national park system at Coltsville until donations of land or interests in land within the boundary of the park have been accomplished. It also provides for donations of space within the East Armory, the focal point of the manufacturing complex, for administration and visitor services. The legislation authorizes agreements with other organizations for access to Colt-related artifacts to be displayed at the park and cooperative agreements with owners of properties within the historic district for interpretation, restoration, rehabilitation and technical assistance for preservation. Any federal financial assistance would be matched on a one-to-one basis by non-federal funds.

H.R. 5131 also provides for the establishment of a commission to advise the Secretary on the development and implementation of a general management plan for the unit. The advisory commission would terminate ten years after the date of enactment of the legislation unless extended for another ten years by the Secretary.

The National Park Service (NPS), pursuant to Public Law 108-94, the Coltsville Study Act of 2003, conducted a special resource study of the resources associated with the Coltsville Historic District. Based on Coltsville's National Historic Landmark designation in 2008, the study concluded that Coltsville meets the national significance criterion. An analysis of comparability to other units of the national park system and resources protected by others demonstrated that Coltsville is suitable for designation as a unit of the national park system. The study was unable, however, to conclude that Coltsville is feasible to administer at this time due to the lengthy duration of financial issues surrounding the site. In concert with the lack of feasibility, the study is also unable to determine the need for NPS management, or specifically what the NPS would manage.

The Department is concerned that financial issues and questions involving ownership and financing of the Coltsville properties, especially funding for the adaptive reuse of significant portions of the manufacturing complex that will remain in private ownership, could impede the successful establishment of the proposed park. Until these private-sector financial issues are resolved, the Department does not believe that the donation of land or interest in land or the donation of space for administration and visitor services can be achieved. We are also concerned about the long-term financial sustainability of the development project, given both its history before and during the entire course of the special resource study and the present economic climate. The Department cannot own or manage the entire manufacturing complex, part of which has already been rehabilitated for residential use, due to what we believe would be prohibitive costs and operational issues associated with potential full federal stewardship should the development project prove unviable.

Should the committee desire to proceed with the legislation, the Department requests an opportunity to work with the committee on language to clarify the conditions of establishment of the unit contained in section 3(a).

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my testimony. I would be pleased to answer any questions from members of the committee.