

House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

Testimony of:

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Hearing on H.R. 3265, the Harry S. Truman Birthplace Study Act

Tuesday, October 30, 2007

10:00 a.m.

1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Bishop, and Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of Lamar, Missouri's Mayor Keith Divine and the citizens of Lamar and Barton County, we thank you for the opportunity to testify before you in support of H.R. 3265, the Harry S. Truman Birthplace Study Act. My aim is to share with you the developments that have led to this requested study, its significance to the City of Lamar, our recent local economic occurrences and the impact this resolution will have on the regional economic future along the US Highway 71 corridor.

University of Missouri Extension in Barton County

My work with Barton County and the City of Lamar began back in September 2005, when I took a Housing and Environmental Design position with the University of Missouri Extension. As a registered architect specializing in Green Architecture and Sustainable Building Technology, I approached this work from a very different perspective. In years past, this position was Home Economics focused and currently needed to be redefined in a more relevant and engaging manner. Several of my Missouri Extension colleagues recognized this opportunity prior to my arrival and developed program efforts for Downtown Revitalization and Community Visioning. Justification for this work emerged during an MU Extension, county-by-county, Plan of Work process that verified

the need for assisting communities, like Lamar, to discover, develop and pursue their own grassroots vision. Programming under a Vision-to-Action framework can also benefit communities by assisting them in developing action steps and connecting them with potential enablement resources.

Missouri's DREAM Initiative

During the Summer of 2006, the need to address the Lamar community's "stagnate vision" was hastened by Governor Matt Blunt's announcement of the Downtown Revitalization and Economic Assistance for Missouri Initiative, most commonly referred to as the DREAM Initiative. The mid-June 2006 announcement of an August 1 deadline caught Lamar ill prepared. Following discussions with community leaders, the consensus was rather than submit a poor application; the citizens of Lamar would develop the awareness, vision, capacity and content for a superior application for the following year.

NextStep 2030 – Lamar

Starting in July 2006, the community leaders developed an action plan for the next 14 months that would include touring nearby revitalized downtowns, establishing an annual LoftWalk, conducting Townhall visioning sessions and securing a university partner to help delineate the community vision. The project became known as NextStep 2030: Pathway to a DREAM. This name seemed rather natural because of the frequent question that followed these discussions, "So what is the next step?" Additionally, the year 2030 holds a special significance because it is the year that the 2006-2007 freshmen class at Lamar High School would celebrate its 20 year class reunion.

University Partnership

Missouri does not have a public university that offers an architecture degree, so in the spirit of collaboration, I contacted my colleagues at Drury University in Springfield, Missouri. Professor Jay Garrott and the Center for Community Studies have provided community design assistance to numerous

communities in Missouri since the late 1980's. During the Spring 2007 semester a team of six architecture students worked with citizens to map the assets of Lamar and pursue ways of connecting those assets with streetscape, signage and redevelopment guidelines. Their work developed concepts and produced more tangible images. Through several interactive community presentations and the creation of a summary document (see attached Exhibit A), years of dreamy discussion became more organized and tangible. When complete, the community realized that they had successfully created the keystone element for their 2007 DREAM Application.

Vision to Action

The Missouri DREAM Initiative application was compiled and submitted in July 2007. In this document, Phase One of a 3 phase proposed action plan focused on two key goals:

- Creation of a more dramatic, 3 block connection between Lamar's downtown square and the Truman Birthplace
- Expand efforts to speed up the Truman Birthplace complex plan completion with major progress made by Truman's 125th birthday on May 8, 2009

Heritage Tourism & State Partnership

In 2002, the Lamar community completed a comprehensive community assessment under the direction of the Missouri Department of Economic Development known as the MoCAP Report. This report introduced the rising potential of "Heritage Tourism", which is reflected in the Missouri Department of Natural Resources site plan for the Truman Birthplace, also completed in 2002 (see attached Exhibit B). Although initially envisioned as a partnership between Lamar and the State of Missouri, an unfortunate lack of progress by the state has deferred clearing structures from the site and construction of the new Visitor's Center. This significant building will be a reconstruction of the historic 2-story Franklin Ward schoolhouse that stood on the site near the time of Truman's birth.

Considering the recent plant closing, discussions have even included reassigning the work of the high school vo-tech carpentry class to construct this simple structure. The original building is documented in photographs and on Sanborn Insurance maps and could be easily rebuilt on this basis. To date, any property required to meet the state's plan has been purchased by Lamar on an "as available" basis and deeded to the state. Apparently, no assertion of eminent domain has been required.

National Historic Site Designation

The Harry S. Truman National Historic Site in Independence and Grandview, Missouri are just over 100 miles to the north of Lamar, easily accessible from US Highway 71. Current tourism information for the National Historic Site does little if any to reference the Birthplace site in Lamar. The fact that the sites are not all owned, operated, and marketed by the same entity, creates competing agendas. By elevating the Birthplace to a National Historic Site or a combining it with the other sites, the Lamar location would benefit from the marketing aspects of the National Parks Service. Regardless of the designation, this would have the potential of increasing the current average annual visitors from 18,600 to the anticipated peak of 25,000 indicated in the 2002 MoCAP Report. Attendance increases of this magnitude would greatly affect the economic vitality of the townsquare and undoubtedly have a positive impact on greater Barton County and the US Highway 71 corridor.

Connecting to Lamar's Historic Constitutional Square

The Truman Birthplace Site is merely 3 blocks away from Lamar's Constitutional Square, the 2nd largest square in Missouri. The downtown area within one block surrounding the Square houses 97 businesses with nearly 650 employees. During late August, the streets are closed and the Square hosts the largest free, county fair in Missouri attracting more than 40,000 visitors annually during the three day event. Additionally, the historic courthouse, banks, renovated Plaza Theatre, county history museum, art center, gallery, coffee

house, merchants, new ice cream parlor and 284 parking spaces demonstrate the Square's value as the cultural center of Barton County. The connection of the Truman Birthplace Site and Square in a more deliberate way would be mutually beneficial as many visitors comment on the "Mayberry quality" of Lamar and its compatibility with the Birthplace Site.

O'Sullivan Plant Closure and Recovery

In early summer 2007, O'Sullivan furniture plant announced that it would close its doors. The impact was substantial, affecting communities in neighboring counties over 30 miles away. Decades earlier, Lamar faced a similar challenge as the LawnBoy manufacturing plant left town, from this same site. Through this transition a new business, O'Sullivan Furniture, emerged.

Considering the issues of globalization and competition, the countywide community began discussions for recovery. One of the most significant was the decision of the Barton County Community Development Corporation to aggressively restructure itself to better understand and respond to business recruitment and retention. These discussions also gave focus to the need for diversity and to embolden their local economy.

The City of Lamar has led the way to recovery in this pursuit. They have aggressively worked on their own and with state and federal resources to fill the vacant plant, with an eminent tenant in place.

Closing

The Truman Birthplace and Lamar, located along US Highway 160, together serve as a gateway to the Missouri lakes area. The combination adds another meaningful aspect for tourism activity, especially when considering the commitment the City of Lamar and Barton County citizens have demonstrated.

In the future, this site will hold increasing significance as presidents, in all likelihood, will not have a "small frame house" in which they were born. President Harry S. Truman embodied the American dream that emerged after his

presidency as clearly demonstrated from its humble beginnings. This is a part of the Truman story that future Americans must have the opportunity to experience.

Again on behalf of Lamar Mayor, Keith Divine, and the citizens of Lamar and Barton County, we ask that you graciously honor the 33rd President of the United States and Missouri's favorite son, Harry S. Truman, by approving this bill, H.R. 3265.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Attachments:

Exhibit A: NextStep 2030: Envisioning the Future – a 159 page booklet

Exhibit B: Excerpted Content from the State of Missouri's Historic Site Webpage
Historic Site Master Plan