

Testimony of The Honorable Bill Anoatubby  
Governor, The Chickasaw Nation  
House Subcommittee on Indian, Insular and Alaska Native Affairs  
February 24, 2016

Good morning, Chairman Young, Congressman Ruiz, and members of the subcommittee.

On behalf of the people of the Chickasaw Nation, thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 3477. We strongly support this important legislation.

I also want to thank the bill's sponsor, Congressman Markwayne Mullin of Oklahoma, for his tireless work on behalf of Indian Country.

The Chickasaw Nation has more than 62,500 citizens and our formal territory boundaries encompass all or part of 13 counties in south-central Oklahoma. We are actively engaged in robust, profitable, growing and diverse economic development efforts all across Chickasaw Country and beyond. Our Department of Commerce manages gaming facilities, hotels, fuel and convenience stores, a metal fabrication manufacturer with international sales, a premium chocolate manufacturer and retailer, along with a host of other businesses. A tribal business, Chickasaw Nation Industries, is one of the largest and most respected providers of services to the federal government and the private sector of its kind, including 8(a) status.

The profit derived from these economic activities are either reinvested in existing or new economic ventures, or they fund the provision of governmental services such as expanded health care, housing, and college tuition assistance. Regardless of whether the funds are put to work in growing economic assets that will yield value well into the future or they provide services today, I am proud to report that all the funds are used for the benefit of Chickasaw Nation citizens.

The purpose of the today's hearing is to review H.R. 3477, a bill that seeks to empower tribal governments by providing them with opportunities to more fully integrate their tourism promotion efforts with those of the federal government.

I believe the success the Chickasaw Nation has enjoyed in developing the Chickasaw Nation Cultural Center and other properties in and around Sulphur, Oklahoma provides a good case study for the subcommittee, and will help to shed light on the enormous potential of Congressman Mullin's legislation.

The willingness on the part of the tribe to devote substantial financial resources to a series of cultural and economic development projects certainly has been important, but financial capital can only go so far. The human capital of positive working relationships, shared visions and compatible goals is in many ways more important. The indispensable element of our success has been a collaborative working relationship with the private sector and federal, state and local governments. This has required a focus

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on patience, building long-term relationships with key stakeholders at every level, and earning the trust of the local population—both tribal and non-tribal residents. We make certain that we listen not only to the concerns of our tribal citizens, but also those of our neighbors.

It is important to note that unlike other parts of Indian Country, there are no reservations in Oklahoma. People from many backgrounds are neighbors who live, work, play and worship together. Without the aid of survey maps it is virtually impossible for the layperson to distinguish between tribal and other governmental or privately held lands. As a result, there is a sense that we all share in a common destiny in our communities. This bond that has helped immeasurably as tribes and other stakeholders seek to improve our collective economic fortunes.

The Chickasaw Nation's first economic development effort in the Sulphur, Oklahoma area in 1972 was the purchase of the old Artesian Motor Hotel. This property was the successor to a popular Sulphur Springs resort, The Artesian Hotel, dating to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Those springs were part of a large parcel of land owned by the Chickasaw Nation that was donated to the federal government—becoming first the Platt National Park and later the Chickasaw National Recreation Area. I will come back to this hotel because it is central to the tourism promotion that is a key element of H.R. 3477, but there are some intervening parts of this story I would like to share first.

In the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the Chickasaw Nation and the federal government exchanged acreage on the western boundary of the Chickasaw National Recreation Area. The unified parcel of land the tribe obtained from that exchange was used to construct the \$40 million Chickasaw Cultural Center. That Cultural Center has hosted more than 443,000 visitors since opening in 2010. The recreation area is estimated to draw just over 1.2 million visitors a year to the local area.

Over time, our relationship with the National Park Service has greatly improved and we continue to discuss innovative ways we can collaborate to preserve a natural wonder that is vitally important to the Chickasaw people. For example, we now exchange interpretive personnel so that visitors receive a seamless cultural and informative experience. Preparations are also underway to open a \$2 million footbridge—funded entirely by the Chickasaw Nation—that will enable visitors to directly access both the Cultural Center and the park on foot along walking trails. In addition, local National Park Service personnel now utilize a state-of-the-art Visitor Center constructed, for \$7 million, and owned by the Chickasaw Nation as their park headquarters—located at the most important intersection in Sulphur at the entrance to the park. I am pleased to report that the federal government has received great value in having us as its landlord through cost savings, improved location and quality of office space.

The Chickasaw Nation also recently spent \$62 million to construct the Artesian Hotel, Casino and Spa immediately adjacent to the Visitors Center. Modeled after the original Victorian-era property, this award winning facility has received an enthusiastic response from the public since opening in the summer of 2013. The opening of the Artesian Hotel

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served as a catalyst to spur the revitalization of the historic downtown area in the City of Sulphur. As a result of the positive tourism environment created through downtown Sulphur development, which included retail and street re-design, collectively the Chickasaw Nation and City of Sulphur together with area organizations have developed the annual Artesian Arts festival that has brought approximately 5,000 visitors to the community on Memorial Day weekend each of its first two years and looks to continue this momentum for a third year.

As many of the members of this committee will no doubt acknowledge, it is one thing to build a series of properties. It is quite another to bring guests through the door, provide them with services for which they are eager to pay, and to keep growing their numbers.

Adventure Road is a tourism partnership with more than 220 Oklahoma businesses, launched in 2015 to promote the "Great American Road Trip." The area the campaign seeks to promote is 100 miles wide and 100 miles long and is anchored on south-central Oklahoma highways. The robust multimedia campaign promotes Adventure Road destinations across digital, television, radio, billboard and print mediums; highlighting the diversified tourism opportunities available within Oklahoma City and south-central Oklahoma. Additionally, the Chickasaw Nation launched Chickasaw Country in 2012, which is the tourism brand for the 13 counties of the Chickasaw Nation. Chickasaw Country was adopted by the State of Oklahoma as one of the six (6) official multi-county tourism regions, and promotes all businesses, including both tribal and non-tribal, as a premier tourism destination. Both Adventure Road and Chickasaw Country are fully funded by the Chickasaw Nation.

In addition, the tribe participates in, manages and helps fund the Chickasaw Country Marketing Association. This group promotes tourism within a seven county region in south-central Oklahoma, specifically Carter, Garvin, Johnston, Love, Marshall, Murray, and Pontotoc Counties. Its mission is to help destinations and attractions maximize their exposure to out-of-town visitors and local residents. The Chickasaw Nation owns a limited liability company that manages the association and is operated through tribal financial support with matching funds from the Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department. Each county has a seat on the association's board, ensuring that all voices are heard as promotional expenditure decisions are made.

We are also active in promoting tourism and collaboration in other parts of the Chickasaw Nation.

Since August 2011, the Chickasaw Nation has operated the Thackerville Tourism Information Center for the State of Oklahoma through a contract. The partnership anticipates savings for the State of Oklahoma of \$200,000 a year, resulting in \$1 million dollar savings over the life of the five-year contract, which is up for review this August. The Information Center receives the largest annual visitation of all state operated Visitor Centers with almost 3 million visitors since August 2011.

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The Break on the Blue Festival is a joint effort undertaken by private business merchants in Tishomingo, Oklahoma and the Chickasaw Country. This spring festival closes down Main Street in City of Tishomingo to vehicular traffic and includes attractions such as museum tours, live music, food trucks, pet-adoption events and many other family-friendly events. In March, we will participate in the second annual festival providing financial, in-kind and volunteer time resources.

The new Chickasaw Nation Information Center in Tishomingo, Oklahoma will house the Johnston County Chamber of Commerce and Johnston County Historical Society. Set to open this fall, the partnership between the Chickasaw Nation and the two organizations will allow visitors visiting Johnston County the opportunity to learn about all commerce and tourism experiences available in the area. The brand new building will allow the two organizations the framework to continue successful promoting and preserving the region.

The economic advantages of all of these collaborative efforts are enormous—not just to the Chickasaw Nation but to every business and community in our region. Indian tribes provide a source of stability and opportunity in rural areas to everyone. Tribes are permanently committed to their homes. Our operations are not moving away to the big city; though I must confess we are happy to pursue opportunities there as well. Economic diversification helps give talented young people a reason to stay in rural areas.

H.R. 3477 will help us continue to strengthen our already robust tourism promotion efforts. For many other tribes across Indian Country it will provide a vital link to audiences they might have difficulty reaching. Cooperation and sensible policies like those suggested by Congressman Mullin will go a long way toward creating a fertile environment for development of mutually beneficial economic opportunities through cross-community efforts.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.