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City of Brownsville, Texas  
Prepared Statement  
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HR 4139

For 80 years, the Brownsville community and the National Park Service have worked together on projects to preserve the sites of the U.S.-Mexican War in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

In 1939, the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce approached Congressman Milton West with an initial proposal to preserve the Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma battlefields. The concept received strong support from communities throughout the lower Rio Grande Valley and the Chamber worked closely with the National Park Service to provide the documentation required for a vote. The plan suffered from unfortunate timing, however, and the effort came to a halt as the U.S. became embroiled in World War II.

Following the war, the NPS and the City of Brownsville renewed ties and once again pursued the goal of establishing a National Park. This time, Fort Brown became the center of attention. The U.S. Army decommissioned the post in February 1946 and the War Assets Administration made the buildings and grounds available to other federal agencies. The National Park Service, with the backing of the City of Brownsville, expressed interest in establishing a National Historic Site at the location of the 1846 Fort Brown earthworks. Unfortunately, the International Boundary and Water Commission also made a claim to this tract to support its levee system along the Rio Grande. Congress passed a bill to transfer land to the IBWC before the National Park Service could complete its request and the proposal for a National Park faded. The NPS did help convince the IBWC to lease the Fort Brown site to the City of Brownsville on a long-term basis so that the area could be preserved as a historical park.

In subsequent years, the NPS and the City government continued to work together to document the Mexican War sites. This resulted in the designation of Palo Alto Battlefield, Resaca de la Palma Battlefield and Fort Brown as National Historic Landmarks in December 1960. With the success of this action, the community once again pushed for the creation of a National Park that encompassed all three of the 1846 sites. The proposal received strong support from regional officials of the National Park Service and rose to the highest levels of the agency. Unfortunately, Department of State officials opposed the legislation, asserting that establishment of a national park focused on the U.S.-Mexican War would strain relations with Mexico at a time when the U.S. was seeking to secure strong allies in the Cold War. This resistance effectively quashed the proposal and the bill never made it to vote.

Activity resumed in 1976 as the United States celebrated its bicentennial. Frank Yturria, a prominent local businessman, noted that national excitement over the American Revolution had overshadowed the importance of the U.S.-Mexican War and he expressed concern about the neglect of the Brownsville battlefields. He purchased a portion the Resaca de la Palma site to protect it from development, and appealed to Congressman Enrique (Kika) de la Garza to have it, and the Palo Alto battlefield, designated as a national park site. The National Park Service endorsed the project but favored focusing on Palo Alto, the better preserved of the two battlefields. Congressman de la Garza drafted a bill to protect that site and, with the extensive support from Yturria, successfully sponsored Public Law 95-625. This legislation permitted the National Park Service to purchase up to 50 acres of land at the intersection of FM 511 and FM 1847 for the establishment of a commemorative area and undertake studies to determine a more appropriate boundary for the park.

In the aftermath of this legislation, the NPS worked to fulfill its requirements. The agency briefly maintained an office in Brownsville, but owing to a lack of operational and land acquisition funds, eventually conducted business from Padre Island National Seashore. From that office, the NPS directed the required boundary study and, in 1979, proposed the establishment of a 4,500-acre park. The US Office of Management and Budget rejected this plan, and the NPS developed a revised proposal for a 2,985-acre site in 1982. Additional studies, including a proposal to append the Resaca de la Palma Battlefield to the park, were hindered by a lack of funding and shifting priorities in Washington D.C. By the mid-1980s, little progress had been made toward the protection of the battlefields.

Community support once again helped push the project forward. In the mid-1980s, the Brownsville Kiwanis club began to advocate for the establishment of the long-sought park at Palo Alto Battlefield. Supporters of the project eventually formed the Palo Alto National Park Committee to lobby for legislation and funding. With the active leadership of local businessman Walter Plitt and the support of Congressional Representatives Kika de la Garza and Solomon Ortiz, momentum grew to create a fully-functional park. On January 3, 1992, Congress passed Public Law 102-304, which designated a 3400-acre area as Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site. President George H.W. Bush signed the bill into law on June 23, 1992.

With the formal establishment of a park, the cooperative relationship between the community and the National Park Service flourished. The park began operations in Brownsville in December of 1993, occupying offices provided at no cost by the Brownsville Historical Association. The NPS also worked closely with the City of Brownsville to develop a General Management Plan for the park. Upon the completion of that document in 1998, the City of Brownsville provided manpower and equipment to assist with the initial construction of roads

and trails at Palo Alto. Community members—most notably Frank and Mary Yturria—also helped the park obtain grant funding and federal appropriations needed to build the park’s Visitor Center, which opened in 2004.

Another cooperative effort had a significant impact on preservation of a 32-acre section of the Resaca de la Palma Battlefield. During development of the Park’s General Management Plan, the City proposed purchasing the site and developing a headquarters facility to lease to the NPS. The two entities also agreed to work together to maintain the grounds of the site as a community historical park. The City followed through with this pledge and purchased the property in 2001, but a financial downturn forced local officials to reassess their investment. Fearing that Resaca de la Palma Battlefield would be sold to developers, a local coalition of supporters devised a plan to have the Brownsville Community Foundation (BCF) buy the site and assume the role previously proposed for the City. The BCF purchased the site from the City and worked closely with Palo Alto Battlefield for several years to develop trails and interpretive opportunities on the site. Over time, however, the management of a historic site conflicted with the BCF mission of community health and education and the organization could not sustain its role. For this reason, BCF board members worked with the City of Brownsville and the office of Congressman Solomon Ortiz to develop legislation that would formally include the Resaca de la Palma site as a unit of Palo Alto Battlefield. President Barack Obama signed that bill into law with the passage of the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009. In 2011, the NPS bought the property from the BCF and took over preservation and operations of the site.

As you can see, Brownsville appreciates and embraces its history and many figures have played a pivotal role in the creation of our beloved National Park. So 73 years after Congress transferred the property in 1946 to the International Boundary and Water Commission, I sit before you

requesting the Congress transfer the property to the National Park Service thereby protecting not only the history of our region, but also our great nation for eternity. The City of Brownsville stands ready to assist and support this transfer and to work with NPS on the preservation of the site.