

Ronika Johnson
Testimony on H.R. 3640
June 28, 2012

Mr. Chairman, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to address HR3640 before you and your committee. My name is Ronika Johnson, I am a resident of Mariposa, California and I am here to represent not only my view, but those of many residents who live in Mariposa County.

To understand the sentiment of many of our town's residents, it's important to know a little bit about our history. Mariposa has a rich history and we are very proud of it. Once populated by Native Americans Mariposa came into existence almost overnight via the deluge of immigrants seeking their fortunes during the Gold Rush. The Gold Rush at one time created a population greater than what resides in Mariposa today. The result was the greatest migration for the search of riches that has ever occurred in the history of the world. Within the short five years after the discovery, more than 300,000 men, and at first it was mostly men, crowded into the wilderness of the Sierra Nevada, searching for the pot at the end of the rainbow.

On February 18, 1850 Mariposa became the largest county of the original 27 California counties, and is known as the "Mother of All Counties." Later the county was split up and now occupies 1,455 square miles of California's rich Mother Lode country. Mariposa is the Spanish name for butterfly, and aptly named by Lieutenant Gabriel Moraga of the Mexican Army in 1806 for the swarms of butterflies he saw along Mariposa Creek. John C. Fremont, an early explorer, is responsible for founding the town whose many streets are named after his family members. In 1854 the famous courthouse was built on land donated by Fremont. Today, it is the oldest operating courthouse in California.

In 1907 construction was started on the Yosemite Valley Railroad. The railroad employed as many as 1,500 men during the early years. The railroad ran from 1907 until 1945 hauling logs, limestone and other mineral. In later years as Yosemite grew in popularity the railroad shuttled tourists to the new wonder. The railroad parallels the north bank of the Merced. A significant change occurred to the railroad in the early twenties by the construction of a large dam on the Merced River at Exchequer east of Merced Falls. That project required the relocation of 17 miles of track and the construction of 5 large bridges and 4 concrete-lined tunnels.

Passenger business on the railroad peaked in the mid-twenties, dropping thereafter due to the increase in private automobile use, accelerated by the completion of the new All-Year Highway (now State Route 140) in 1926. The loss of the logging/lumber freight business in 1942 and then the limestone/cement business in 1944 eventually resulted in a request to abandon the railroad. The last scheduled run came on August 24, 1945; scrapping operations commenced shortly thereafter.

Mariposa is known as the Gateway to Yosemite. Our businesses thrive on the tourism industry and the local economy feels it, especially now. We have many locally owned restaurants & hotels mostly in our downtown area. Our small town is very historic and preserved to stay as such. To preserve our historic look, ordinances have been put in place, such as limiting the height of business signs to not obstruct views, and encourage natural or historic appeal. Business volume is very seasonal, traffic & tourism is heaviest May thru September. The off season is very detrimental to all businesses and layoffs are unavoidable for most small business owners, which is the general makeup of our businesses, those owned by the private sector.

My main concern regarding HR3640 is that there has been no public hearing or input on the matter. Residents feel there is a lack of transparency and that it is being 'slipped' in with special interests. While it benefit's the Park Service and their employees, it poses several implications and impacts to the community itself that have not been addressed. Most residents don't even know about it.

Currently the Federal Government owns 50% of Mariposa County. The proposed development is requesting 18 acres of land in the heart of Mariposa. Even this amount of acreage seems too much for the proposal of a Federal building, parking lot & possibly a museum. How much more does the Federal government need to take from Mariposa County before we are just an extension of Yosemite? Yosemite is approximately 30 miles from Mariposa. While we all realize the need to accommodate tourism, there are other alternatives and ways to meet these needs. However they have not been addressed. This is viewed as a Federal overreach and local government wants to promote a public/private partnership without a detailed plan offered to the public. What about the private business sector? Why not move this project into El Portal, where the land is already owned by Park service? Why spend at a time such as this? Our residents should have a say in how their community is developed, especially with tax payer funds. Mariposa's Tax base revenue will be lost, traffic will be impacted and local businesses will be negatively effected with the expansion of a 4 Star Hotel and Conference Center. While broad vision, smart growth and planning is encouraged, the residents of Mariposa have not had the opportunity to engage these ideas nor have they been revealed in a public forum.

The bill itself, HR3640 is vague and open ended, which leaves doubt and confusion as to the intent and direction of the bill. The prohibition of eminent domain remarked in the bill indicates that if it does not meet the requirement, then we question the intent and necessity.

Mariposa residents oppose HR3640 and encourage the committee to deeply consider the impacts of this bill to the residents & town of Mariposa.

Our hope is that this bill will NOT proceed further through the process until it is more thoroughly researched. This includes public hearings, detailed “proposed” drawings including roadways and other transportation issues, the impact (if any) on local hotels and restaurants.

We are not opposed to thoughtful growth and additional amenities to Mariposa County, but I feel it has to be done in a fashion that indicates the best possible solution for those of us who call Mariposa our home.

Thank you for your consideration to our historic town and the residents who care so deeply for it.

Sincerely,

Ronika Johnson, Mariposa, California