

HISTORIC PRESERVATION VS. KATRINA

House Hearing Held November 1st

November 4, 2005 - On Tuesday, November 1st, the House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform Subcommittee on Federalism and the Census held a hearing to examine what roles the federal, state, and local governments should play in preservation of historic properties in the areas affected by Hurricane Katrina and to explore the legislative relief package proposed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the American Institute of Architects. Subcommittee chair (and co-chair of the Congressional Historic Preservation Caucus) Mike Turner (R-OH) presided over the hearing. In his opening statement, Representative Turner expressed the importance historic preservation should play in hurricane relief as both an economic revitalization tool and to save our important historic legacy. Representative Turner also recognized the need for federal, state, and local governments to coordinate their response in historic preservation relief efforts.

The subcommittee heard testimony from two panels. The first panel was comprised of representatives of state and local level organizations impacted by Hurricane Katrina. Witnesses included: The Honorable Mitchell J. Landrieu, Lieutenant Governor of the State of Louisiana; H. T. Holmes, Director of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History and the state's historic preservation officer; Derrick Evans, Founder and Director of Turkey Creek Community Initiatives; Patricia Gay, Executive Director of Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans; and David Preziosi, Executive Director of the Mississippi Heritage Trust. All witnesses stressed the importance historic preservation must play in hurricane recovery for each of their localities and also stated support for the proposed legislative relief package. When questioned about how effective tax credits would be as opposed to grant relief, panelists agreed that a combination of tools is necessary and important to properly assist preservation efforts in disaster areas. There was also consensus that the 106 review process will play a critical part in rebuilding efforts, but additional resources will be needed.

The second panel consisted of representatives of national organizations: John Nau, Chairman of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation; Janet Matthews, Associate Director for Cultural Resources at the National Park Service; Richard Moe, President of the National Trust for Historic Preservation; and Norman Koonce, Executive Vice President and CEO of the American Institute of Architects. The testimony from this panel focused on

the immediate need for federal response of preservation aid to hurricane affected areas and provided insight on the legislative package proposed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the American Institute of Architects. In addition, it was noted that sufficient resources for State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPO's) and local organizations is essential for efficient recovery and reconstruction of historic resources. It was also suggested that Congress support disaster preparedness programs through SHPO's in order to better respond to future disasters.

In closing, Representative Turner gave panelists the opportunity to comment on why historic preservation is important in the face of a national disaster. Many of the panelists remarked that preservation not only shapes our sense of place and defines our concept of community, but also provides economic benefits. Mr. Nau made the striking comparison of heritage tourism and the oil industry, both of which suffered in the wake of hurricanes on the Gulf Coast. He pointedly commented that to walk away from preservation is to walk away from an industry, and we would never walk away from the oil and gas industry.

The preservation community owes a great deal of gratitude to Representative Turner for bringing these important issues to the attention of Congress. Representative Turner has again proved himself a preservation champion by having a keen understanding of the importance of preservation in the hurricane rebuilding effort. National preservation organizations are convening on how to best follow up to this hearing. Stay tuned for how you can help with this initiative.