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Chincoteague Pleads Its Case in Washington

By Linda Cicaira

If "Misty" is the magic word you use to make people identify your geographical location, you might be from the Eastern Shore of Virginia. If you feel like a government agency is trying to mess with your ponies, parking or power, you might be a local resident with a fight.

Residents and officials watched a battle via the Internet last Friday. At stake are parking places at Assateague Beach, a destination that attracts tourists and provides recreation for local folks. The conflict also could affect the herd size of famous wild ponies, another visitor attraction. The latter, owned by Chincoteague Fire Company, raises funds for fire and rescue equipment and services instead of taxing property owners.

The controversy over spending federal dollars to rebuild parking spaces that get washed out in storms isn't new. The roads and spots have seen the surf before. But this time, allegations are getting particularly ugly and lines are being drawn in the sand.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), which makes policy for Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, secretly applied for and obtained a \$1.5 million grant to purchase land on Chincoteague for parking. Its lack of transparency has led to suspicion.

An FWS representative told a House of Representatives National Resources subcommittee Friday that its only option is to purchase Maddox Family Campground on Chincoteague and that parking there would serve as an overflow or emergency. "We believe it to be a long-time insurance policy," said Wendi Weber.

Local officials aren't buying the explanation. They can see the transit buses coming up the causeway. They

call it a violation of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which basically "establishes national environmental policy and goals for the protection, maintenance, and enhancement of the environment and provides a process for implementing these goals within the federal agencies."

They also view the parking strategy as the first step in "eventually removing human beings off the beach."

"It's clear the goal of the federal government is to make sure no one can drive to the beach," said Rep. Andy Harris of Maryland. He complained that the cost to fix the 960 parking places amounts to 50 cents per person per visit. "Give the visitors the choice ... people want to enjoy the beach ... we should be encouraging economic activity." Harris repeatedly brow-beat an FWS employee who did not have some answers he was looking for readily available.

"I am here today to tell you that I feel we are being railroaded into less or no parking at the beach and forced to ride a trolley system in the future," said Mayor Jack Tarr. He referred to a slide presentation made by Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge Manager Lou Hinds that started with a crowded roadway going to the beach. "And his comment was, 'The American people have become too dependent on their vehicles,'" Tarr said.

"Every time we suggest how the plan that provides 1.5 million visitors a year and the #1 Beach Town in 2011 could be improved, we are told that it is 'against our policy,'" the mayor continued. "Sand fencing to prevent beach erosion ... Christmas trees to prevent beach erosion ... dune maintenance and planting ... beach nourishment 'against our pol-



Chincoteague Mayor Jack Tarr and Supervisors Wanda Thornton testify before a House National Resources subcommittee.

icy.' The \$7.5 million that is proposed for a mass transit parking lot would go a long way to take care of the visitor facilities that we already have ... Chincoteague is under siege by the FWS. Their policy of implementing transit in parks and purchasing property in our town limits ... will kill jobs, crush investment and create economic uncertainty in our town."

"You will hear from the government that they have bent over backwards to hold public meetings and have invited stakeholders to meet on many occa-

sions," said Supervisor Wanda Thornton. "This is true. But what is also true is that our concerns have been ignored, we have been lied to, we have been told that no matter what we say the refuge manager has 51 percent of the vote."

"Chincoteague (people) are fearful for their jobs, they are fearful that their investments in local businesses or restaurants may be wiped out because a local refuge manager wants to shut down the current ocean-accessible beach and force tourists to ride into the

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refuge on a mass transit shuttle," she said. "We have asked our visitors what they think of this idea and more than 80 percent of them said they would not come back ... if they were forced to use mass transit. They like being able to drive to the beach parking lot where they can easily unload their beach gear and spend the day with their family."

"We would like them to work with us to preserve the current beach parking system which has been in place over

the past five decades," said Thornton. "There is nothing wrong with the current system that can't easily be fixed. We would like them to stop proposing to thin the pony herd on the refuge. We would like them to develop a cost-sharing plan for repairing the beach parking lot and stop using the modest amounts it takes to repair the beach parking lot as a red herring for their argument to abandon the beach."

"This is a classic example of an over-reaching, paternalistic federal government imposing its will without regard for the needs, desires, or economic well-being of the people," said Rep. Scott Rigell, who represents the area. "The town, the county and the Virginia House of Delegates have all adopted resolutions disapproving of any effort to expand the boundaries of the refuge within the town to establish a Disney-like transit system. It is unacceptable that the refuge would continue to pursue a plan that has drawn such deep objections. We are regulating ourselves out of prosperity."

By law, the Secretary of the Interior

must prepare a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the refuge to determine future management of the site.

"The fact that the Fish and Wildlife Service is moving forward with one option, while at the same time telling the public that they are reviewing all options, is certainly contrary to at least the spirit of the National Environmental Policy Act," said Subcommittee Chairman John Fleming.

Art Gallery Owner Nancy Payne was alone in her trust of the FWS. She said the needs of Chincoteague and Assateague islands differ. "One's primary purpose as a national refuge is to protect the wildlife and fragile land mass that is literally at the edge of the Eastern Shore. On Chincoteague, individuals, business owners and private landowners ... and many in the population rely on money generated from the tourists who sleep, eat and shop on our island but go to Assateague for outdoor recreation. Issues arising around these differences can create awkward situations." She favors the shuttle system for emergency use and as an addition to the hundreds of parking spaces. She called the suspicions over-reaching.

"Our island's employers, employees and residents are angry and scared," said S. Scott Chesson, an island hotel owner. "We are angry because our federal government seems to be on a course to turn Chincoteague Island into a ghost town. We are angry because it seems that the current management of the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge has been less than honest and forthcoming. ... The grant award of \$1.5 million came as a shock to us all since we had the assurance that the FWS had no intentions of reducing or eliminating parking at the beach."

"Unfortunately, the business people of Chincoteague ... no longer view the Fish and Wildlife as our partner - they have become an impediment and a threat to our livelihood," said Chesson. "We are scared because a future with limited access to the beach on Assateague Island via a bus service will destroy jobs, diminish property values and close the doors of family owned and operated businesses." He suggested putting an additional 200 parking spots right at the beach with concessions that could be used to raise money to repair any future damage."

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