

March 25, 2020

The Honorable David Bernhardt
Secretary
U.S. Department of Interior
1849 C St. NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

David Vela
Director
National Park Service
1849 C St. NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Re: Support for African American Civil Rights Project in Charles Town, WV

Dear Secretary Bernhardt and Acting Director Vela:

I write to convey my strong support for a project in Charles Town, WV to restore and preserve two buildings that are key pieces of the African American civil rights heritage of that community, the State of West Virginia, and our nation. I encourage you to give your highest consideration to supporting this project with a \$118,500 *African American Civil Rights* grant from the National Park Service.

Charles Town has long been a center of African American neighborhoods and civil rights activity. Three key anchors of Charles Town's civil rights heritage include Star Lodge #1, the First Free School, and Fisherman's Hall. Star Lodge #1 is the first Black Mason lodge in West Virginia, active from 1877 through to today. Built by President Abraham's Freedman's Bureau, the Charles Town First Free School on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, has long been a "social and community anchor" where "African Americans formed a power base. . . from which they worked in circumspect, astute ways to mitigate the difficulties of bondage and racial bias", as described in document that led to the designation of the "Old Charles Town District" on the National Register of Historic Places. These two buildings complement historic Fisherman's Hall, located on what is known as "Black Main Street", which was restored from ruin with support from National Park Service with a *Save America's Treasures* grant, and is now used as a community center.

Together, these three buildings were the hub of the endeavors by black West Virginians in this region to confront the Jim Crow era and forge 20th Century progress for African-Americans. Emerging from the cradle of a community where John Brown the abolitionist rebelled and was hanged, and where W.E.B. Dubois and other early leaders created the Second Niagara Movement in 1906 as a precursor to the NAACP, these buildings in Charles Town became the center of 20th century civil rights struggles and progress. In Star Lodge, Fisherman's Hall, and the First Free School, black citizens and organizations conducted education, job training, mutual aid, support for commercial activities by black entrepreneurs, neighborhood and community improvement projects, the hosting of artists on the Chitlin' Circuit, the exercise of faith, political activism, and other efforts to address the challenges of racism, inequality, and the scourge of drugs and violent crime. These three structures are recognized as "monuments to the

community's historic efforts for education, benevolence, and social justice" (Old Charles Town Historic District nomination, Section 8, p. 12), places that W.E.B. DuBois described as a "most interesting and neglected field of historical and economic exploration."

I understand that the Charles Town community, including the City and its partner the Jefferson County NAACP, plans to use the restoration of these African American centers to boost our ongoing endeavors to build an inclusive community and the heritage tourism economy. However, these buildings are badly threatened by deterioration and need restoration resources to preserve them and keep them as active community, cultural, and heritage tourism centers.

The Charles Town community is seeking to leverage \$118,500, together with cash and in-kind resources from the City of Charles Town, the African American Community Association of Jefferson County, faith-based organizations and others, to restore these buildings that anchored the region's 20th century African American heritage and progress. Restoration efforts will improve public access and create new opportunities for residents and visitors to engage with Charles Town's Civil Rights Era legacy.

I have been pleased to work with Charles Town and Jefferson County for many years to preserve, celebrate, and use historic places and structures for tourism, economic development, and community uses. When I was Governor of West Virginia, I helped fund the initial restoration of Fisherman's Hall, together with support from the National Park Service. I believe that this Charles Town project, and the community's application for National Park Service, African American Civil Rights grant funding, are worthy of the highest consideration. I appreciate your support for these endeavors.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Joe Manchin III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Joe Manchin III
United States Senator

cc: Mayor Robert Trainor
Jefferson NAACP President George Rutherford

JMIII/ph