

A congressional proposal to sell the Thomas Stone National Historic Site in Port Tobacco and 15 other national parks across the country for commercial and residential development has infuriated the Sierra Club, historical preservationists and elected officials.

The proposal is included in a report by the House Resources Committee chaired by U.S. Rep. Richard Pombo (R-Calif.). It suggests that the sale of national historic sites that have fewer than 10,000 visitors a year would generate \$2.4 billion in new federal revenue, said Glen Besa, regional director of the Sierra Club's Appalachian Region. The Stone site draws 6,000 to 8,000 visitors a year, a National Park Service official said.

The suggestion to sell such national treasures for development is preposterous, Besa said Tuesday.

"The Sierra Club is extremely concerned with Congressman Pombo's efforts to sell our national parks," he said. "We're going to do everything that we can do to stop Congressman Pombo. We think that he's out of control."

U.S. Rep. Steny H. Hoyer, whose district includes the Stone site, said the proposal has little chance of gaining Congress' approval.

"Thomas Stone National Historic Site is an important historic site that I have fought to restore over the years, and I do not take lightly any suggestion to sell it," Hoyer (D-Dist. 5) of Mechanicsville said in a prepared statement. "I believe that the proposal floated by the Republican chairman of the House Resources Committee to sell Thomas Stone and other parks is DOA and will not garner support of any significance from Democrats or Republicans. I will carefully monitor its progress, however, I do not anticipate it moving any farther."

Besa said the proposal to sell the national historic sites is part of a 285-page piece of legislation tucked inside the federal Budget Reconciliation Act of 2005. Also included in the bill are proposals to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to petroleum exploration and allow offshore oil and gas drilling in now-restricted waters.

Pombo's office countered that the proposal was misinterpreted, citing a letter written to the congressman by Robert Holtz-Eakin, director of the Congressional Budget Office. Apparently,

the budget office has been working with the House Resources Committee staff to develop estimates to meet savings targets.

“It appears that in the process of gathering information for such estimates, the CBO inadvertently disclosed draft legislative language that was developed to enable us to prepare cost estimates and that might have been misconstrued to be the committee’s reconciliation proposal,” Holtz-Eakin wrote in the Sept. 23 letter.

Proposing to sell the country’s national historic sites to raise capital is ridiculous, said Del. Sally Y. Jameson (D-Dist. 28) of Bryantown.

“That’s a very ill-suited way to find funding,” she said. “If the rumor is true, I’ll certainly be working with our delegation to make sure that it doesn’t happen.”

“With the amount of money that the federal government put in the Thomas Stone site, more than \$8 million, I seriously doubt that the federal government will save any money by selling it,” said Del. W. Daniel Mayer (R-Dist. 28) of Newburg. “I applaud the congressman for being frugal, but he’s looking in the wrong direction.”

Charles County commissioners’ President F. Wayne Cooper (D) said the site is one of the county’s premier tourist attractions.

“Tourism is one of our No. 1 priorities. We’re really directing resources to it,” he said, adding that if the recommendation takes root in legislation he would suggest that the county commissioners oppose it.

“I would definitely bring it before the county commissioners to write a letter to oppose it,” he said.

The suggestion to sell national historic sites to raise money for the federal government is

unacceptable and should be nipped in the bud in the early stages, said Bonnie Bick of Oxon Hill, conservation chairwoman for the Maryland chapter of the Sierra Club.

“Representative Pombo is from California, and he doesn’t know the Thomas Stone National Historic site or how valuable it is to us,” she said. “We do know. We love it, and we will stand together to protect it.”

National Park Service officials are holding their fire for now regarding the proposal to close the parks, said Vidal Martinez, superintendent of the Thomas Stone site and the George Washington Birthplace National Monument site in Colonial Beach, Va.

“It’s purely a proposal. Congress has got to act on it,” he said Tuesday. “We would like to see how far this goes before we react to this.”