

A "brainstorming" document mistakenly made public last week on Capitol Hill included a proposal to sell one of Charles County's historical gems: the Thomas Stone National Historic Site. Even though the California congressman's office that ordered up the document insists it was merely a budget exercise, proponents of the site are not taking any chances.

Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.) said funding the restoration of the home of one of the nation's founding fathers "has been a priority for me while in Congress, and I will fight against any attempt to diminish or sell it."

A list prepared for Rep. Richard W. Pombo (R-Calif.) suggested selling the Thomas Stone National Historic Site. (Photos By Mark Gail -- The Washington Post)

"I will closely watch the Republican proposal," he said in a statement, "but I do not expect it to garner support or get off the ground in Congress."

The list prepared for Rep. Richard W. Pombo (R-Calif.) suggested selling as many as 15 parks for commercial development. Pombo included sites that attract fewer than 10,000 visitors a year.

The Charles County commissioners and other Southern Maryland officials are working to protect regional historic sites that are threatened by rapid development. In June, the Board of Commissioners endorsed the creation of a historic preservation panel and a tax incentive to encourage property owners to restore old homes and landmarks.

At the same time, the National Park Service has invested \$880,000 to expand the visitors center at the Thomas Stone site, on Rose Hill Road west of La Plata, to try to increase visits from teachers and students and to create space for lectures and other events.

"The proposal was one designed to look at ways to save dollars, but at the risk of losing a historic site like Thomas Stone, certainly we can consider other alternatives," said Vidal Martinez, the park superintendent, who was careful to say he did not want to overreact to something that is "strictly a proposal."

Stone, a lawyer, was one of four signers of the Declaration of Independence from Maryland. The plantation home dates to 1772 and, according to the Park Service, stayed in his family until 1936.

After the central brick section was damaged in a fire in 1977, the property was designated a national historic site and then purchased by the Park Service in 1981. Since then, the federal government has spent \$4 million to restore it, Martinez said.

Brian Kennedy, a spokesman for the House Resources Committee, which Pombo chairs, said there is nothing to worry about. The document produced by the Congressional Budget Office was part of a bureaucratic process to find ways to raise \$2.4 billion, he said.

"The number one reason they don't normally see the light of day is that they can be misconstrued by those who don't understand the process as actual proposals, when they're not," he said, adding for emphasis: "No selling of anything."

To clarify the situation further, Kennedy shared a letter from the Congressional Budget Office that refers to the list as "draft legislative language" that should not be considered a proposal.

"We apologize for this error on our part and sincerely regret any confusion it has caused," he said.