

Delegation testifies at mountain naming hearing

Local representatives against new monikers for Negro, Polish

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CUMBERLAND — All four members of the District 1 legislative delegation testified in Annapolis on Tuesday in opposition to Senate Joint Resolution 3, which seeks to have a committee appointed to rename Negro and Polish mountains.

The resolution would have the governor establish and appoint the members of the naming commission, who would be required to decide on new names by Dec. 31. The names should “reflect more accurately the history and culture of the region within which they are located,” the resolution reads. A companion House Joint Resolution 8 also has been filed.

Delegation members Sen. George Edwards and Delegates Wendell

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Beitzel, Kevin Kelly and LeRoy Myers Jr. testified before the Senate Education, Health and Environment Committee.

“I thought it went pretty well,” said Edwards, who said he and Kelly also submitted packets of historical materials and letters and e-mails from constituents. The Senate operates under informal rules of local courtesy, which dictate that legislators will not testify against a bill offered by a colleague.

Edwards said this was the second time in 29 years as a legislator he’d done so, the previous time was

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against a bill that would have effectively ended bear hunting season.

"I felt it was important enough, you kind of have to pick and choose. It was nice the whole delegation was there," he said.

Kelly agreed with Edwards' assessment, adding that Midge Smith, a former staffer for Edwards and the delegation, also testified in opposition to the bill. Smith has spent time as a tour guide and researched Maryland's black history to provide better information for her tours, Kelly said.

"We got everything out that we wanted to get out," Kelly said. Among other things, Kelly argued that naming the mountain Nemesis, after what's believed to be the name of the black man in whose honor the mountain is named, could have unintended consequences.

"Look up Nemesis in the dictionary; it has horrible connotations," said Kelly. And Mount Nemesis won't send people to the Internet to research the name, because folks will "assume it's because

of bad accidents there or the weather." The name Negro Mountain draws curiosity and interest and will "result in people wanting to know the history of the mountain," said Kelly.

Renaming the mountains creates a slippery slope of going after any name assumed to be politically incorrect, Kelly said.

Kelly said blacks in his constituency are overwhelmingly in favor of retaining the name Negro Mountain. Goliath, said Kelly, is the bad guy in the Bible and again, people will assume it was named after the biblical Goliath rather than a local black hero. Negro may be an antiquated term, but it's not a disparaging term, Kelly said. He noted that the U.S. Census retained Negro as an option for self-identification because some older blacks still use the term.

Edwards said he offered a suggestion that the same information provided in the historical marker on U.S. Route 40 at Negro Mountain be placed near the Interstate 68 sign with the mountain's name.

The history of the naming of Negro Mountain varies from

account to account, but the main facts are similar. A black man accompanying Col. Thomas Cresap's rangers during the French and Indian War saved Cresap's life, and lost his own, in a battle with Indians. He was probably a free black man, and his name was Nemesis, although some accounts say he was named Goliath. He was a man of large stature.

Nemesis is said to have had a premonition of his own death, which he disclosed to Cresap before the battle. After Nemesis was laid to rest on the mountain, the mountain was named in his honor.

The bill will eventually be voted on by the committee, said Edwards, and if it passes, would be considered on the Senate floor. Edwards would prefer the bill be killed in committee.

"We'll have to wait and see. I think if it gets to the floor, we have enough votes not to pass it," he said.

Sen. Lisa Gladden, the lead sponsor of the resolution, was the only person who testified in support of the resolution, Kelly said.

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