BEFORE THE
GEORGIA PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

In Re: Sandersville Railroad Company's Petition For Approval to Acquire Real Estate by Condemnation	**Docket No.: 45045**

DIRECT TESTIMONY OF JANET PAIGE SMITH

to be presented as a panel consisting of
Members of the No Railroad in Our Community Coalition
& Others

August 25, 2023

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Q. PLEASE STATE YOUR NAME, OCCUPATION, AND ADDRESS.

A. My name is Janet Paige Smith. I am a retired educator, a veteran, and now a freelance writer and author, and I have been writing for Guideposts Magazine since 2012. I began my career in teaching with the Hancock County School System, where I taught for 12 years. I've also taught for three years with the Department of Defense School System in Japan, and then with the Washington County School System. I retired with the Baldwin County School System. I live on Shoals Road in Sparta, GA with my husband, David Mark Smith.

Q. HAVE YOU PREVIOUSLY TESTIFIED BEFORE THE COMMISSION?

A. No, I have not previously testified before the Commission.

Q. HOW LONG HAVE YOU RESIDED AT YOUR HOME ON SHOALS ROAD IN SPARTA?

A. I've lived at this residence for over thirty years. I graduated from the University of Georgia and received a commission from the U.S. Army. I married David Mark Smith, and we traveled for 12 years in the military with a tour in Germany. After I separated from the military, we moved back to my husband's family farm the family farm with our children in 1992. We left Sparta, GA in 2003 to accept teaching positions with the Department of Defense School System in Atsugi, Japan. We returned in 2006 and have lived in this community since then.

Q. DESCRIBE YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD AND COMMUNITY AS IT EXISTS TODAY.

A. My husband's family owns the largest property in Hancock County of any African American landowner. The property continues to benefit the community and the county because anyone, regardless of their race or social economic background, can fish and hunt on the 600 or so acres that Mark's grandfather bought, and can even harvest vegetables from our garden. In my experience, African Americans cannot really do these things anywhere else in the area. Most land that I see in Hancock County has no trespassing signs. We also have the Smith Gardens Food Ministry, where we give the elderly food from the garden, and we sell produce from our gardens to Helping Hands, a local food bank through the state of Georgia. At the same time, the community already must deal with noise, dust, and debris from mining in a nearby quarry. So, there are disruptive elements that have already been introduced to interrupt our peaceful way of life, and we do not need any more of the disruptions that the proposed railroad would bring.

Q. HOW LONG DO YOU PLAN TO REMAIN IN YOUR COMMUNITY AND IN SPARTA?

A. For the rest of our lives.

Q. HAVE YOU EVER CONSIDERED SELLING YOUR PROPERTY?

A. No.

Q. WHAT IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE NO RAILROAD IN OUR COMMUNITY COALITION?

A. Although Benjamin Tarbutton, President of the Sandersville Railroad Company, sent us a letter stating our property would no longer be needed for the

project, my husband, David Mark, and I had already begun to reach out and take the lead in fighting for our property as well as our family's and community members' properties. We have an elderly, retired community. That is why we took the lead with the coalition. Most of our neighbors do not have the ability to do research or the means to go up and down the road to put up yard signs, hang posters, and stand in front of the courthouse to protest the railroad. Due to a lack of access to the Internet and technical knowledge on how to text, email, or use the Internet, our elderly community members must rely on us to communicate for them. My husband and I travel door to door to gather information from our neighbors and update them on the status of the Coalition's fight to stop Sandersville Railroad Company. Most people live on a fixed income and work shifts or outside of the county, so when we ask them to do something, they have to think about how to pay for gas and other things first.

Q. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE NO RAILROAD IN OUR COMMUNITY COALITION?

A. The No Railroad in Our Community Coalition is fighting to stop Sandersville Railroad Company from taking private land from our neighbors to build a railroad. Shouldn't the life and health of human beings be more important than the economic prosperity of a few businesses? We believe that the people in our community have a right to an environment free from the noise and pollution from a train in their back yards. The Coalition organized and hosted its first community rally in opposition to the Hanson Spur at the Hancock County Courthouse in Sparta, Georgia, in August 2022. Since then, we have held monthly rallies to inform the community about the

threat of the proposed railroad and to recruit members who are interested in opposing the rail spur in our community and county. We also spearhead media campaigns to amplify the voices of community members; write a monthly newspaper article that serves Sandersville and Sparta, Georgia, to protest the railroad and spotlight our prayer rally; attend Hancock County Commission meetings; have sent letters to Hancock County officials, the Georgia Public Service Commission, and Georgia State Department of Transportation; spoke to Georgia State Representative Mack Jackson, United States Senator Raphael Warnock, and Senator Warnock's Field Office Aide, Andrew Young; created and distributed No Railroad in Our Community Coalition branded yard signs; and recruited nonprofit partners to further our mission of stopping the Hanson Spur project and preventing new environmental burdens to our community. Most recently, the Coalition applied to intervene directly in these proceedings.

Q. WHAT INTERACTIONS HAVE YOU HAD WITH THE SANDERSVILLE RAILROAD COMPANY?

Initially, we received a letter from Sandersville Railroad Company dated April 4, 2022. The letter contained information about the railroad project, notice that some of our property would be required for the project, and a form asking for our financial information, like our mortgage and who holds liens on our property. After the August 2022 community meeting, we sent a letter in response to Tarbutton's letter, telling him that he did not have permission to come on the property. Tarbutton sent us a letter threatening us with the Hancock Sheriff's Department if we did not allow him

to survey our property. A couple of days later, we were sent a letter by Sandersville Railroad Company stating that the train route had been changed, and they would no longer need our property. The train route still came onto Smith property though.

Q. WHERE IS THE PROPOSED RAILROAD PROJECT LOCATED WITH RESPECT TO YOUR PROPERTY?

A. Approximately fifty yards from our property line.

Q. WHAT DISTURBANCES, IF ANY, DO YOU EXPECT THE RAILROAD, THE EXPANDED QUARRY, AND ALL OTHER ASSOCIATED DEVELOPMENT WILL CAUSE TO YOUR PROPERTY?

A. I expect that the railroad will devalue our property.

Q. WHAT DISTURBANCES, IF ANY, DO YOU EXPECT THE RAILROAD, THE EXPANDED QUARRY, AND ALL OTHER ASSOCIATED DEVELOPMENT WILL CAUSE YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD?

A. Our Black, elderly, retired, working-class community is already adversely affected daily by the explosions from blasting granite rock, constant noise from crushing rocks, and asphalt fumes from large trucks traveling back and forth from two rock quarries and an asphalt plant. Now, Benjamin Tarbutton wants to add a freight train. I expect that the railroad and expanded quarry will increase the noise level in the neighborhood. We also fear additional air and water contamination from the railroad and the Heidelberg Quarry; increased traffic; strangers coming into our neighborhood from the train; accidents like spills, fires, and possible derailments, which so many other communities are dealing with recently. We already suffer from

traffic, air pollution, noise, debris, trash, and more from the Heidelberg Quarry, but this project would make everything worse. Our community members have a right to clean water, air, and a noise level that won't cause us physical and mental harm.

Q. ARE THERE ANY OTHER REASONS YOU FOUNDED THE COALITION?

A. We knew we could not do this by ourselves as individual property owners. Over the past 16 months, with no answers from Benjamin Tarbutton, who has not tried to communicate with the neighbors or the Coalition other than through letters from his office and attorneys, I feel as though our community was targeted because it is Black and not affluent.

We needed this entire community—in fact, we need this entire county—to come together to help provide people power. And it has been effective with our Hancock County Board of Commissioners members. The No Railroad in Our Community Coalition has been effective in getting our elected officials to listen to us. After the August meeting with the entire county, Benjamin Tarbutton has yet to request a meeting with the community or coalition leaders to find a resolution to help our already burdened community.

Q. IF THE RAILROAD IS NOT BUILT, WHAT IS YOUR PLAN FOR YOUR PROPERTY?

A. Our plan is to leave our property to our sons and their children. They are the only Smith grandchildren that have been raised here on this property, and one of them was born here.

Q. IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD?

When my husband and I received the first letter from Ben Tarbutton in April, we had just retired as schoolteachers the year of the pandemic, and our youngest child had graduated from college at the same time. We were starting to enjoy doing the things we had looked forward to after forty years of working away from home and raising children. When the letter arrived, we actually thought it was a mistake, or even a joke, but when the letters kept coming and our neighbors and family members asked us, "Did you get one too?", we knew this could be a real threat to our property. We were disappointed when our Board of Commissioners said there was nothing they could do, and the county attorney recommended we get a lawyer. That was disheartening because we had just helped a child through college and had saved for house repairs and mini vacations, not legal fees.

We did not see ourselves forming a coalition. People kept looking to us to do something, asking, "What are you going to do?" With our strong faith, military experience, and years teaching, we knew that we had to fight to not only keep our land but help our neighbors and family members fight for theirs, too. Mark and I understand that when God calls you to a task, you've got to answer the call.

Q. DOES THIS CONCLUDE YOUR TESTIMONY?

A. Yes.

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I hereby certify that I have served a true and correct copy of the foregoing Direct Testimony via electronic mail and United States Mail with sufficient postage thereon to the following, pursuant to Ga. Comp. R. & Regs. 515-16-16-.02 and 515-2-1-.04(4)(b), (3), addressed as follows:

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