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 MELANIE BENSON

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

August 25, 2023

Jamie Rush (Georgia Bar No. 999887)
Malissa Williams (Georgia Bar No. 964322)
Miriam Gutman (Georgia Bar No. 170768)
The Southern Poverty Law Center
150 E. Ponce de Leon Avenue, Suite 340
Decatur, GA 30030
E: jamie.rush@splcenter.org
E. malissa.williams@splcenter.org
E. miriam.gutman@splcenter.org
T: (404) 673-6523

Counsel for Intervenors
No Railroad in Our Community Coalition ("NROCC")

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

A. My name is Melanie Benson. I am a credentialing and data management specialist with Positive Behavior Supports Corporation. I live at 229 Maggie Reynolds Road, Sparta, GA 31087.

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 229 MAGGIE REYNOLDS ROAD IN SPARTA?

A. I purchased my property in January of 2022 and moved here in May 2022.

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

A. I specifically purchased my property because it backs up to an 844-acre land trust. I used to live in South Florida, and I saw what overdevelopment did to the community. I wanted to move somewhere where I could avoid all development and noise. I wanted a change from the busy, overpopulated, no nature area that I used to live in, and have found that here in Sparta.

Everybody that lives on my road has been long-term residents. They all have such wonderful family histories. My community has a nice, quiet, hometown feel.

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

A. For as long as I can. I plan to retire here. I'd like to start a small farm and

be self-sustaining and move my children here when they finish school.

Q. WHAT IS YOUR INVOLVEMENT WITH THE NO RAILROAD IN OUR COMMUNITY COALITION?

A. I attend the rallies in front of the courthouse when they have them. I get updates from Janet and Mark Smith.

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

A. Looking at the Sandersville Railroad website and their proposed route map, it appears it will be going directly behind my property.

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

A. If the Railroad comes on my property, I won't be able to live there. The train would be right outside my door. What happens if it derails? I am gone. My animals are gone.

I have four children who live mostly with their dad in South Florida, and two are minors. They are 15 years old; they have special needs and have a lot of health issues including chronic lung disease. I bought this property so that I could set them up with a smaller home. Once they graduate from their special needs high school in South Florida, they will need to be supported full time. I don't want them to feel like they need to live inside mommy and daddy's house. I thought this would be a fantastic thing for them. But that's not safe for them. I have a million environmental

concerns.

The stress around this proposed construction is causing my health to suffer. I am so mentally stressed about it. I stopped fostering animals because I may get a notice all of a sudden. I wanted to make plans with my children to visit me, but the plans were very up in the air until the last moment, because I wasn't sure if the railroad would start construction. I am afraid I will get a notice on my door to vacate because the route looked like it will be coming right near my back door.

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

A. This railroad would cause many types of pollution. Noise pollution. Air pollution. Ground water pollution. I am also worried about the foundations of our homes. The recent blasts from the quarry have destroyed my new foundation. To expand the quarry and the blasts, I don't see how anyone's homes can withstand the blasts.

Q. ARE THERE OTHER REASONS YOU JOINED THE COALITION TO OPPOSE THE RAILROAD IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

A. It is important to me that the railroad not be built because it will destroy the character of the community. I don't think it benefits the community. It only damages it. It doesn't even bring a financial benefit to the community.

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

A. I hope one day to pass all of my land to our family members intact. And before then, I want to enjoy my land and grow as much produce and food as I can.

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:

VIA Electronic Mail and U.S. First-Class Mail:

L. Craig Dowdy
Steven L. Jones
TAYLOR ENGLISH DUMA, LLP
1600 Parkwood Circle
Suite 200
Atlanta, Georgia 30339
Telephone: (770)434-6868
Facsimile: (770)434-7376
cdowdy@taylorenglish.com
sjones@taylorenglish.com

Robert S. Highsmith, Jr.
Laura E. Flint
HOLLAND & KNIGHT LLP
1180 West Peachtree Street NW
Suite 1800
Atlanta, Georgia 30309
Telephone: (404)817-8500
Facsimile: (404)881-0470
robert.highsmith@hklaw.com
laura.flint@hklaw.cm

Counsel for Petitioner Sandersville Railroad Company

Grant E. McBride
Smith, Welch, Webb & White, Attorneys at Law
2200 Keys Ferry Court
P. O. Box 10
McDonough, Georgia 30253
Tel.: (770)957-3937
Fax: (770)957-9165
Email: gmcbride@smithwelchlaw.com

Robert B. Baker
Georgia Bar No. 033881
ROBERT B. BAKER, PC
2480 Briarcliff Road, NE, Ste. 6
Atlanta, Georgia 30329
(706) 207-5002
bobby@robertbbaker.com

William R. Maurer
Washington Bar No. 25451
INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE
600 University Street, Ste. 1730
Seattle, WA 98101
(206) 957-1300
wmaurer@ij.org

Elizabeth L. Sanz
California Bar No. 340538
Renée D. Flaherty
District of Columbia Bar No. 1011453
INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE
901 N. Glebe Rd., Ste. 900
Arlington, VA 22203
(703) 682-9320
bsanz@ij.org
rflaherty@ij.org

Counsel for Property Owners

Robert Donald Garrett, Sr.
Sarah V. Garrett
1335 Shoals Road
Sparta, Georgia 31087

Marvin Smith, Jr.
Patricia Smith
15500 Avery Road
Rockville, Maryland 20855

Sally G. Wells
140 Dunn Road
Sparta, GA 31087

Verne G. Hollis
373 Hamilton Street
Sparta, GA 31087

Thomas Ahmed Lee
8201 Brookriver Drive, Ste. 246
Dallas, TX 75247

William Blain Smith
Helen Diane Smith
823 Chatsworth Drive
Accokeek MD 20607

Joel Bradford Reed
Kathy Lynn Reed
5 Dogwood Lane
Chatsworth GA 30705

Donna N. Garrett
154 Lakeview Drive
Sparta, GA 31087

Herus Ellison Garrett
111 Brookwood Court
Eatonton, GA 31027

Leo John Briggs
Georgia Ann Briggs
4500 Hidden Stream Drive
Loganville, GA 30052

Property Owners

Nancy Gibson
Georgia Public Service Commission
244 Washington Street SW
Atlanta, Georgia 30334
Telephone: (404)463-0882
Facsimile: (770)342-3054
E-mail: ngibson@psc.ga.gov

Designated Hearing Officer

Sallie Tanner
Georgia Public Service Commission
244 Washington Street SW
Atlanta, Georgia 30334
Telephone: (404)656-4501
Facsimile: (404)656-2341
E-mail: stanner@psc.ga.gov

Executive Secretary of the Public Service Commission

Rob Trokey
Georgia Public Service Commission
Georgia Public Service Commission
244 Washington Street SW
Atlanta, Georgia 30334
E-mail: rtrokey@psc.ga.gov

Director, Electric Unit of the Public Service Commission

Respectfully submitted this 25th day of August, 2023.

/s/ Jamie B. Rush
Jamie B. Rush
Georgia Bar No.: 999887
SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER
150 E. Ponce de Leon Ave., Ste. 340
Decatur, Georgia 30030
Telephone: (404)673-6523
Fax: (404)221-5857
Email: jamie.rush@splcenter.org

Counsel for Intervenors
No Railroad in Our Community Coalition
("NROCC")