

Time short to preserve battlefields

House speaker sees sesquicentennial as 'last best chance' to save Civil War battlefields in Virginia, kicks off statewide preservation conference

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MANASSAS

--The hourglass is running out on chances to preserve unprotected pieces of Virginia's Civil War battlefields, Bill Howell says.

"Now is the time to redouble our efforts" to save them for future generations, the speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates said last night in a speech at Prince William County's historic courthouse in Manassas.

The observance of the war's 150th anniversary, which began last Tuesday at Fort Sumter, is the perfect time to shield the surviving places that were hallowed by the sacrifices of soldiers from North and South, Howell said.

His remarks kicked off Virginia's first statewide battlefield preservation conference, which continues today in Prince William. Yesterday was the 150th anniversary of the date the Virginia Secession Convention in Richmond voted to secede.

The courthouse, built in 1893, sits at the corner of Grant and Lee avenues, an appropriate setting for the speech.

"Being able to learn from and relive history where it actually occurred isn't a given," the Stafford Republican said. "It's not something we can take for granted."

Without progress now, battlefields will disappear, Howell said. Some 50,000 acres of the state's "core" battlefields, where the most intense fighting took place, are intact but without protection from development, he said.

"The times we live in right now may be one of the last, best chances to protect Virginia's unpreserved Civil War battlefields--before they are lost forever," he said. "I'm hopeful that I'm wrong, but we just cannot take the chance."

Yet Howell also hailed "great strides" on the conservation front.

Word in January that Walmart, confronting a legal challenge, had decided against building on the Wilderness battlefield in [Orange County](#) was "heartening" news, he said. "Persuading Walmart not to develop, but preserve, its property there was a great victory," Howell said. "Walmart's decision couldn't have been more timely as Virginia and our entire nation begin this year to commemorate the sesquicentennial of the Civil War."

The speaker hailed the Virginia conservation tax credit program, which has helped preserve more than 500,000 acres as open space, including battlefields across the commonwealth.

He noted the establishment last year, with bipartisan support, of the state Civil War Site Preservation Fund. It provides grants to nonprofit groups that leverage the state aid with private-sector money to save key parcels--as the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust did at its Wilderness Crossroads tract next to Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park.

Howell said he believes Virginia's Civil War history offers poignant lessons that "illuminate" people's understanding of the present and can help guide their future actions.

The commonwealth was the conflict's most fought-over ground.

"With only 100 miles separating the two competing capitals of Richmond and Washington, no state suffered, endured or lost more than Virginia," he said. "Today, 150 years later, we continue to wear the scars of that era with a mixture of pride, sober reflections and historical interest."

But that history isn't all retrospective, he said. It provides a "tremendous opportunity" for education about "the most trying--and most transformative--period in U.S. history," he said.

Howell noted that the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission has been supporting study of the conflict and its impacts, from multiple perspectives, for several years. Its third signature conference, May 31 in Blacksburg, will cover military strategy and feature Virginia Tech's James I. Robertson Jr. and other distinguished historians.

The 150th anniversary can also fuel heritage tourism, which draws many Americans and international visitors to the state, he said.

The 2007 commemoration of Jamestown's 400th anniversary "was largely about one place on a single day," he said. "The Civil War lasted four years. And there were 122 nationally significant battles--one-third of all key battles--fought right here in Virginia. So visitors can literally walk in the footsteps of generals, politicians and the troops they commanded."

Acknowledging that "preserving open space and historical landmarks is neither cheap nor easy," Howell also said, "It's a big enough job that government cannot--and should not--do it alone."

But he wrapped up with a rousing call to action. "Virginia is the place to make your mark," he told the conference attendees. "Let us work together to seize this great

opportunity, create a lasting legacy and preserve Virginia's history for all those who will come after us."

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