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Senate Bill 241 (Substitute S-1 as passed by the Senate)
Sponsor: Senator Tom George
Committee: Transportation

Date Completed: 2-25-04

RATIONALE

Before the Civil War, many slaves escaped from the South via the Underground Railroad, a secretive network of safe hiding places and people willing to provide transportation between them. According to the Michigan Department of History, Arts and Libraries, the Underground Railroad operated primarily between 1830 and 1861. Some Michigan citizens played a key role in the Underground Railroad, helping escaped slaves to settle in the North or make their way to Canada. It has been suggested that two sections of highway in southwestern Michigan, where there is a well-documented history of Underground Railroad activity, be named the "Underground Railroad Memorial Highway".

CONTENT

The bill would amend the Michigan Memorial Highway Act to name portions of the I-94 and US-131 highways the "Underground Railroad Memorial Highway".

The I-94 portion would extend from exit 98 to exit 110 in Calhoun County. The US-131 portion would be in Schoolcraft Township, Kalamazoo County, and extend from the intersection of US-131 and West U Avenue to the intersection of US-131 and West XY Avenue.

MCL 250.1073

BACKGROUND

Southwestern Michigan is significant in the history of the Underground Railroad. The home of Dr. Nathan M. Thomas, the first physician in Kalamazoo County and an antislavery advocate, is located in Schoolcraft. Slaves began arriving at the home alone or in

small groups in 1838. In 1843, the house became a "station" on the Underground Railroad, where larger groups of escaped slaves would stop to be fed and housed for the night before going on to Battle Creek. It is estimated that, during the 20 years the house served as a station, between 1,000 and 1,500 people received food, shelter, and medical aid from Dr. Thomas and his wife, Pamela. The structure, which Dr. Thomas expanded to include a secret room in the attic, has been moved from its original site to another site on the same street. It remains open for touring and is visited by many tourists from Michigan and other states every year.

The Underground Railroad Monument is located in Battle Creek and features Erastus Hussey, who, with his wife, Sarah, helped more than 1,000 slaves escape. Harriet Tubman, a former slave who made at least 15 trips to the South to bring other slaves to freedom via the Underground Railroad, also is featured in the monument. A monument to Sojourner Truth, another widely known former slave and abolitionist, also is located in Battle Creek, where she died in 1883.

ARGUMENTS

(Please note: The arguments contained in this analysis originate from sources outside the Senate Fiscal Agency. The Senate Fiscal Agency neither supports nor opposes legislation.)

Supporting Argument

Michigan played a key role in the Underground Railroad. In the years leading up to the Civil War, battles were fought in the hearts and minds of the Michiganders who opened their homes and provided transportation to former slaves at great risk to themselves. Those who

assisted escaped slaves could face heavy fines by the Federal government. According to a document written by Pamela Thomas, some people were forced to sell their farms and move to another state after they helped others escape slave hunters who came to Cass County in 1847.

By dedicating portions of two highways to the Underground Railroad, the bill would help educate Michigan residents and visitors, encourage them to celebrate and respect the important role the State has played in the struggle for equal rights.

Response: The portion of US-131 specified in the bill already is part of the Mackinac Trail, which encompasses US-131 from the Michigan-Indiana border in St. Joseph County to the Straits of Mackinac. Dual designations could diminish the importance of each, and cause confusion with multiple signs.

Legislative Analyst: Julie Koval

FISCAL IMPACT

The bill would have no fiscal impact on State or local government.

Fiscal Analyst: Craig Thiel

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This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan Senate staff for use by the Senate in its deliberations and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.