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Opponents of Disney Park Find Allies in Congress

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WASHINGTON, June 17 — A festering dispute between advocates and foes of a theme park that the Walt Disney Company is planning to build near important Civil War battlegrounds has spilled out of Virginia and into Congress, turning what began as a local spat into a national debate.

Largely at the urging of environmentalists and historians who want to protect the region from urban sprawl, a bipartisan group of 16 House members this week introduced a resolution opposing the park, Disney's America, which would be built in Prince William County about 35 miles west of Washington. In addition, a Senate subcommittee has been persuaded to hold a hearing, which is set for Tuesday.

It remains unclear just how disruptive this additional layer of opposition will be to the \$650 million project, scheduled for completion in 1998. While the House opponents called on Disney to build elsewhere and urged Federal agencies to insure that development complied with laws governing air quality, transportation and historic preservation, their step was only a call to arms, not a threat of legislative action.

Disney officials say they are not worried.

"I don't see anything anywhere that would impede forward progress," Michael D. Eisner, Disney's chairman,

said in an interview this week. "I would have thought that if we could do something in a celebratory way, people would be enthusiastic." Backers See a Boon

In fact, many Virginians are enthusiastic, among them Gov. George Allen, Senator John W. Warner and seven of the eight members of the Prince William Board of Supervisors. Like them, thousands of county residents see the 3,006-acre theme park as a boon to development, employment and the local tax base. Mr. Allen was the driving force behind a \$163 million bond issue for the Disney project; most of the proceeds will pay for improving roads in the area.

Robert Singletary, chairman and president of the Welcome Disney Committee, a coalition of 11 organizations, hailed the benefits projected by Disney: 19,000 permanent jobs, 2,800 construction jobs, \$48 million a year in new state taxes and up to \$12 million for Prince William County.

"People are interested in seeing Prince William grow economically and grow soundly," Mr. Singletary said. Those who raise environmental and historical concerns, he said, are speaking nonsense. 'Issues Are Now Elevated'

But his is not a universal view in Congress, and the project's opponents predict that the interest of Federal

lawmakers will dramatically widen the focus of debate and perhaps force Disney to choose an alternative site.

"The issues are now elevated and really joined for the first time," said Neil Proto, a lawyer representing a group of authors and historians fighting the project. "Once they're elevated, I think they will be taken very seriously. To now, there has been no detached, objective analysis of the project. The facts have only come from Virginia and Disney. The process now will yield disclosure of the real facts, hopefully, early enough to affect all major decisions made about this."

With so many of Virginia's political leaders supporting the Disney plan, which envisions hotels, shops, two golf courses and 2,281 residential units, opponents see Federal involvement as their best and perhaps only chance to force Disney to build elsewhere.

They argue that the theme park and other Disney plans would spur so much commercial and residential development that traffic would choke

roads, spoil the air quality and overwhelm existing neighborhoods. And they assert that it would endanger what many historians consider some of the most hallowed grounds of American history. One group has identified 13 historic towns, 16 Civil War battlefields, including Manassas, and 17 historic districts within an hour's drive of Haymarket, the town nearest the site of the proposed park. 'More Than a Local Issue'

In announcing the House resolution, Representative Michael A. Andrews, a Texas Democrat who led a fight six years ago against development of a shopping center near the Manassas National Battlefield Park, called the Disney project "far more than a local issue" and said the impact on Manassas and the Shenandoah National Park "would be devastating."

In a letter to Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, Mr. Andrews implored that Disney be held to regulatory environmental standards, and he urged that Interior do what it can to delay the project.