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## Heritage areas are facing first resistance in Congress

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WASHINGTON — Every region of the country has its own piece of Americana that locals brag about to visitors.

Increasingly, they are asking Congress to help spread the word through a little-known federal program that designates National Heritage Areas.

After approving just two dozen such areas since the early 1980s, Congress adopted 10 last year. The House signed off on six more last month, and the wait list is growing.

Illinois wants recognition for Abraham Lincoln's early stomping grounds; New York is bidding for the area around Niagara Falls. Alabama is pushing a region along the Tennessee River where the Tennessee Valley Authority was born and where "Father of the Blues" W.C. Handy first picked a guitar.

Yet for the first time, the program is facing resistance on Capitol Hill from budget hawks and property-rights advocates. The National Park Service has called for a freeze on new designations until lawmakers approve more formal guidelines for the program.

"This is a relatively new model for conservation," said John Cosgrove, executive director of the Alliance of National Heritage Areas. "More and more community leaders want to apply it to their own regional stories."

Modeled after European practices, heritage areas are billed as a cost-effective, locally driven alternative to government-managed historic sites. The government does not buy property, impose land restrictions or provide staff. In fact, the heritage program is expanding in part because little money is available for new publicly owned park facilities.

Instead, grass-roots groups are encouraged to preserve geography and history within livable communities. A heritage designation comes with a federal grant of up to \$1 million a year, to be matched locally.

The locals have flexibility in managing the areas, and the 37 existing sites have various approaches since the first was named in 1984, designating a historic canal linking the Great Lakes and the Illinois River.

"The reason for the increased demand is that they're successful," said Marge Darby, who has helped lead a bid for a "Freedom's Way" heritage area highlighting early American history in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. More than 120 lawmakers voted against the recent House bill approving the "Hallowed Ground" and "Freedom's Way" areas, as well as others in Illinois, New York, Alabama and Arizona. The designations await Senate approval.

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