SENATE RESOLUTION No. 79

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

219th LEGISLATURE

INTRODUCED JULY 28, 2020

Sponsored by:
Senator JOSEPH P. CRYAN
District 20 (Union)

SYNOPSIS

Urges State of Alabama to rename Edmund Pettus Bridge after Congressman John Lewis.

CURRENT VERSION OF TEXT

As introduced.

A SENATE RESOLUTION urging the State of Alabama to rename the Edmund Pettus Bridge after Congressman John Lewis.

WHEREAS, John Lewis was a civil rights icon who dedicated his life to protecting human rights, securing civil liberties, and building what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called "the beloved community" in America; and

WHEREAS, The son of southern sharecroppers, John Lewis grew up in the Jim Crow South attending segregated public schools and working on his family's farm; and

WHEREAS, After listening to Martin Luther King's sermons on the radio and reading about the Montgomery bus boycott, Lewis was inspired to become a part of the Civil Rights Movement and get into what he called "good trouble"; and

WHEREAS, While studying as a student at American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, Lewis engaged in a thorough study of the philosophy of nonviolence; and

WHEREAS, In putting his studies on nonviolence into action, Lewis and his fellow civil rights activists staged lunch counter sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and voter registration campaigns; and

WHEREAS, As a result of their efforts, Nashville became the first major Southern city to begin desegregating its public facilities; and

WHEREAS, Once he graduated from the seminary, Lewis later joined a Freedom Ride organized by the Congress of Racial Equality, also known as CORE, and took bus rides throughout the South where he risked his life by sitting in seats reserved for white patrons; and

WHEREAS, During one of his Freedom Rides, Lewis was beaten and left unconscious in a pool of his own blood while trying to enter a white waiting room at a bus terminal; and

WHEREAS, Lewis also was one of the founders and later the president of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, an organization formed to give younger Blacks more of a voice in the Civil Rights Movement; and

WHEREAS, By 1963, Lewis was recognized as one of the "Big Six" leaders of the Civil Rights Movement along with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Whitney Young, A. Philip Randolph, James Farmer, and Roy Wilkins; and

WHEREAS, During the March on Washington, Lewis served as one of the planners of the march and was one of the keynote speakers on the day Dr. King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech; and

WHEREAS, On March 7, 1965, Lewis and fellow activist Hosea Williams led over 600 marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma to demonstrate the need for voting rights in the State of Alabama; and

WHEREAS, The marchers intended to walk from Selma to Montgomery but were met at the end of the bridge by Alabama State Troopers who ordered them to disperse; and

WHEREAS, When they instead stopped to pray, the police threw tear gas into the crowd while charging at demonstrators and beating them with nightsticks; and

WHEREAS, In what later became known as "Bloody Sunday," John Lewis sustained a fracture to his skull after being hit by a nightstick; and

WHEREAS, Images of Lewis and fellow marchers being beaten by police were broadcast across the nation causing widespread outrage and galvanizing support for passage of the Voting Rights Act; and

WHEREAS, On August 6, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act which banned the use of literacy tests previously needed to exercise the right to vote, provided for federal oversight of voter registration in areas where less than 50 percent of the non-white population had not registered to vote, and authorized the United States Attorney General to investigate the use of poll taxes in state and local elections; and

WHEREAS, From 1960 to 1966, Lewis was arrested over 40 times and repeatedly beaten by Southern policemen and white crowds resistant to the demands of the Civil Rights Movement; and

WHEREAS, In 1986, Lewis was elected to Congress and represented Georgia's Fifth Congressional District for over 30 years; and

WHEREAS, While serving in Congress, Lewis continued to be an advocate for nonviolence and racial justice by opposing armed conflict, genocide, and apartheid, earning him the nickname "the Conscience of the Congress"; and

WHEREAS, In 2011, President Obama awarded Lewis the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, for his dedication to the cause of justice and equality; and

WHEREAS, Sadly, John Lewis passed away on July 17, 2020 of pancreatic cancer; and

WHEREAS, On Sunday, July 26, 2020, Lewis crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge one final time as his funeral procession made its way to the Alabama State Capitol to lie in state before continuing to Washington D.C. and Georgia; and

WHEREAS, In the wake of his death, there have been growing calls to rename the Edmund Pettus Bridge after John Lewis to honor his legacy; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED *by the Senate of the State of New Jersey:*

1. This House respectfully urges the State of Alabama to rename the Edmund Pettus Bridge after Congressman John Lewis to honor his extraordinary contributions to this nation.

2. Copies of this resolution, as filed with the Secretary of State, shall be transmitted by the Secretary of the Senate to the Governor of the State of Alabama and the presiding officers of the Alabama Senate and the Alabama House of Representatives.

STATEMENT

This House respectfully urges the State of Alabama to rename the Edmund Pettus Bridge after Congressman John Lewis. John Lewis was an icon of the Civil Rights Movement who, along with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., mobilized thousands of Black Americans to demand racial equality. On March 7, 1965, Lewis and fellow activist Hosea Williams led over 600 marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma to demonstrate the need for voting rights in the State of Alabama. The marchers intended to walk from Selma to Montgomery but were met at the end of the bridge by Alabama State Troopers who ordered them to disperse. When they instead stopped to pray, the police threw tear gas into the crowd while charging at demonstrators and beating them with nightsticks. In what later became known as "Bloody Sunday," John Lewis sustained a fracture to his skull after being hit with a nightstick. Images of Lewis and fellow marchers being beaten by police were broadcast across the nation causing widespread outrage and galvanizing support for passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Lewis later continued his life of service by representing Georgia's Fifth Congressional District in Congress for over 30 years where he remained an advocate of racial justice and nonviolence.

In recognition of his work during the Civil Rights Movement and as a member of Congress, it is fitting and proper for the State of Alabama to honor the extraordinary legacy of Congressman John Lewis by renaming the Edmund Pettus Bridge in his honor.