

PURPOSE AND NEED

PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

The Blue Ridge Parkway connects the Shenandoah National Park in Virginia with the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina via a 469 mile scenic parkway. The Blue Ridge Parkway is ranked as “America’s most scenic drive” by leading travel writers (National Park Service, 2003). This sanctuary of high places encompasses a world of mountain forests, wildlife, and wildflowers thousands of feet above a patchwork of villages, fields, and farms. The toll-free parkway combines awesome natural beauty with the pioneer history of gristmills, weathered cabins, and split rail fences to create our country’s most popular national park area. National Park Service data indicates that annual recreational visitation rose from 16.9 million in 1990 to 19.2 million in 2000 (National Park Service, 2004c).

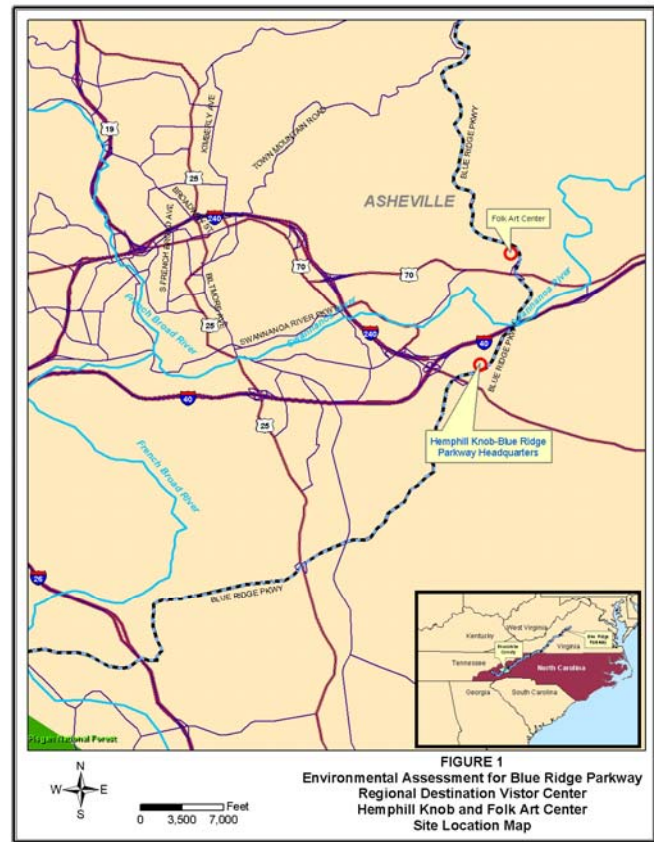


FIGURE 1. HEMPHILL KNOB AND FOLK ART CENTER SITE LOCATION MAP

There are twelve visitor centers located along the Blue Ridge Parkway that offer services ranging from gift and craft sales and interpretive demonstrations to food and lodging. The interpretive demonstrations that are offered at some of the visitor centers and a few other attractions along the Blue Ridge Parkway are generally oriented toward the unique attributes of that particular attraction, according to Blue Ridge Parkway staff. The Blue Ridge Parkway has no primary visitor center that provides interpretation of the overall parkway and its resources.

The National Park Service is considering the construction of a regional destination visitor center for the Blue Ridge Parkway near Asheville, North Carolina. Two locations are being considered for the regional destination visitor center. One location is at Blue Ridge Parkway Milepost 382.0 at the Folk Art Center site and the other location is at Milepost 383 at the Blue Ridge Parkway headquarters site at Hemphill Knob (see Figure 1). Congress recently appropriated \$3,000,000 toward construction of the regional destination visitor center at the Hemphill Knob site.

The primary purpose of the regional destination visitor center is:

Interpretation of natural and cultural resources along the Blue Ridge Parkway via an entertaining, immersive, and interactive format in which the public can participate through the use of state-of-the-art-technology.

An educational forum via a range of programs, workshops, and media that facilitate learning for a broad range of visitors (i.e., area residents, school groups, college students, and the public).

Information and orientation to the Blue Ridge Parkway and to link the public to community functions and attractions within the Asheville community and the greater Western North Carolina region.

This Development Concept Plan / Environmental Assessment analyzes the impacts to the natural, social, and physical environment of five alternatives, including the no-action alternative, the preferred alternative, and three other alternatives. This environmental assessment has been prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and regulations of the Council of Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1500 – 1508); the National Park Service Director's Order No. 12 (DO-12) and the associated handbook *Conservation Planning, Environmental Impact Analysis, and Decision-making*; and Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (as amended). This document will be used to comply with Section 106 regulations.

PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PARK

The legislated purpose of the Blue Ridge Parkway, under a federal action of June 30, 1936, is to link Shenandoah National Park in Virginia and Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina and Tennessee by way of a recreation-oriented motor road intended for public use and enjoyment. Under the provisions of the Organic Act approved by Congress on August 25, 1916 (39 Stat. 535) creating the National Park Service, the intended purpose of the Blue Ridge Parkway is to conserve, interpret and exhibit the unique natural and cultural resources of the central and southern Appalachian Mountains, as well as provide for leisure motor travel through a variety of environments.

The general interpretation of the Blue Ridge Parkway's purpose has been refined into the following more specific purpose statements (National Park Service, undated).

Physically connect Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains National Parks by way of a 'national rural parkway' - a recreational destination-oriented motor road traveling through a variety of scenic ridge, mountainside and pastoral farm landscapes.

Manage the scenic, natural and cultural resources of the Blue Ridge Parkway's designed and natural areas to preserve the integrity of resources and to provide a quality visitor experience.

Influence the protection of the scenic, natural and cultural resources within the corridor composed of those lands that are visible from the Blue Ridge Parkway and/or situated adjacent to the boundary.

Conserve and provide for the enjoyment and understanding of the natural resources and cultural heritage of the central and southern Appalachian Mountains.

Provide opportunities for visitors to experience the scenic qualities, recreational uses and natural and cultural resources of the Blue Ridge Parkway and its corridor.

The route of the Blue Ridge Parkway follows mountain and valley landscapes to link Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains National Parks. Its location was selected to provide the best in a variety of scenic, historic, and natural features that evoke the regional image of the central and southern Appalachian Mountains. In order to maximize scenic views and give Blue Ridge Parkway visitors the impression that they are in a park with boundaries to the horizon, the Blue Ridge Parkway was located in mountainous terrain that normal roads would have avoided. The Blue Ridge Parkway was the first national rural parkway and is widely recognized as an international example of landscape and engineering design achievements with a roadway that lies easily on the land and blends into the existing scene. The Blue Ridge Parkway also was the first national rural parkway to be conceived, designed, and constructed as a leisure-type driving experience.

The Blue Ridge Parkway follows the crests and ridges of the Blue Ridge, Black, Great Craggy, Great Balsam and Pilot Balsam Mountains. These five major mountain ranges are part of the central and southern Appalachian Mountains. The 469 mile parkway encompasses several geographic and vegetative zones, with altitudes ranging from approximately 650 feet at James River in Virginia to nearly 6,050 feet at Richland Balsam in North Carolina. The Blue Ridge Parkway is known for spectacular mountain and valley vistas, quiet pastoral scenes, sparkling waterfalls, colorful flowers and foliage displays, and interpretation of mountain history and culture. Its varied topography and numerous vista points offer easy public access to spectacular views of southern Appalachian rural landscapes and forested mountains. Designed for recreational driving, the Blue Ridge Parkway provides visitors with quiet, leisure travel, free from commercial traffic and the congestion of high-speed highways. As its All-American Road status indicates, it is one of the most diverse and high quality recreational driving experiences in the world.

Because of its diverse topography and its numerous vista points, it provides the most accessible way to visit and experience spectacular southern Appalachian rural landscapes and forested mountains along a 469-mile long protected corridor. The Blue Ridge Parkway is the highest and longest continuous route in the Appalachian area.

The Blue Ridge Parkway is a primary catalyst for the promotion of regional travel and tourism. It serves as a unifying element for 29 counties through which it passes, engenders a shared regional identity, provides a common link of interest and is a major contributor to the economic vitality among the different counties.

Because of its long length, proximity to large Eastern United States urban areas, numerous access points, quality design and diversity of scenic, natural and cultural resources, the Blue Ridge Parkway is the most visited National Park Service area.

As an example of pre- and post-war automotive rural parkway design, the Blue Ridge Parkway retains the greatest degree of integrity of any parkway in the United States. The Blue Ridge Parkway is further recognized throughout the world as an international example of landscape and engineering design achievements with a roadway that lies easily on the land and blends into the landscape.

The park's uninterrupted corridor facilitates the protection of a diverse range of flora and fauna including rare and endangered plant and animal species and areas designated as national natural landmarks.

The park preserves and displays cultural landscapes and historic architecture characteristic of the central and southern Appalachian highlands.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Previous Planning

The Blue Ridge Parkway headquarters was relocated to Asheville, North Carolina, in 1972 after more than 37 years in Roanoke, Virginia. The move was necessary as a recent realignment of National Park Service service areas excluded Virginia from the Southeast Region. Also, Asheville, North Carolina would have been a more central location, considering a proposal to extend the Blue Ridge Parkway to Marietta, Georgia. This proposal is now dormant. The headquarters was temporarily located in downtown Asheville away from the Blue Ridge Parkway, but the National Park Service planned to relocate the headquarters adjacent to the parkway. In a study published in 1981, a number of sites along the Blue Ridge Parkway were evaluated to identify an appropriate location for a permanent headquarters facility. The sites that were evaluated included the consideration of an adjoining visitor center since the Blue Ridge Parkway had no facility providing comprehensive visitor orientation and information services. The study identified Hemphill Knob as the most appropriate site. Hemphill Knob was acquired by the National Park Service in 1986 for the purpose of constructing a permanent headquarters complex.

In 1989, a Development Concept Plan and Environmental Assessment were completed for siting the Blue Ridge Parkway headquarters at the Hemphill Knob site. One of the alternatives considered included the addition of a new comprehensive visitor center at the Hemphill Knob site. This methodology was consistent with the study accomplished in 1981.

A 1995 report prepared by Advantage West further explored the potential of a proposed visitor center located at Hemphill Knob that would feature hi-tech and heavily interactive regional orientation and interpretive exhibits, a giant screen theater with

seating for 300 to 500 individuals, and parking for 170 cars and 10 buses/recreational vehicles.

The regional destination visitor center conceptual identity was further refined in a March 2004 report prepared by Destination Cinema. The recommendations included in this report will be the primary focus of the Development Concept Plan/Environmental Assessment.

The development of a general management plan is currently underway for the parkway with final completion scheduled for 2006. The regional destination visitor center is not included in the proposed general management plan. However, both the Hemphill Knob site and the Folk Art Center site are zoned for visitor services. Therefore, either site could accommodate the regional destination visitor center.

The Department of the Interior, National Park Service has received \$1,000,000 for planning and \$3,000,000 for construction of a regional destination visitor center at Hemphill Knob. (HR108-195, S.108-89) (HR108-542, S.108-341).

Scoping

Scoping is an open process that is performed at the beginning of the environmental assessment process to determine the project alternatives and the breadth of environmental issues to be addressed in the environmental assessment.

The National Park Service conducted both internal scoping with appropriate National Park Service staff, as well as federal, state and local agencies, and external scoping with the general public and affected groups. The internal scoping meetings were held at Blue Ridge Parkway headquarters during the week of August 2, 2004. In addition, scoping letters were mailed to the following agencies:

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

North Carolina National Forest Service

North Carolina State Clearinghouse

North Carolina Department of Transportation

North Carolina Historic Preservation Office

North Carolina Department of Environment, Health & Natural Resources

North Carolina Natural Heritage Program

North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission

North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources

North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission

North Carolina Division of Environmental Management
North Carolina Department of Agriculture

The North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources responded to our letter with a request for additional information. The area around the Folk Art Center has not been systematically surveyed. Furthermore, areas outside the previously surveyed area for the Blue Ridge Parkway headquarters also have not been surveyed. These areas have a high probability for the presence of prehistoric and historic archaeological sites, according to the state agency. They requested that site plans and location maps be sent to them so they could continue their review. This letter is located in Appendix A.

A letter was received from the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission regarding the project. The letter listed nine points of information that they requested be included in the regional destination visitor center environmental assessment. In addition to the points of information, the agency made recommendations for measures that would protect the natural resources in the vicinity, such as using best management practices during construction, and limiting impervious surfaces to reduce stormwater runoff. This letter is also located in Appendix A.

The US Army Corps of Engineers responded to the scoping letter on November 30, 2004, stating that the proposed action may affect waters of the United States and associated wetlands, but that the scoping letter did not provide enough information to determine the extent of the wetlands in the vicinity of the project or the type of permit that would be required for the action. The Corps requested additional data for review and comment, as well as a determination of the Department of the Army permit eligibility. The staff of Blue Ridge Parkway determined that there are no wetlands in the construction area, nor in the vicinity of the project, and no further coordination was undertaken. A discussion of the impacts to wetland resources was dismissed from analysis in the Affected Environment.

The external scoping meetings were held at a local hotel and Blue Ridge Parkway headquarters during the week of September 6, 2004. Comments were solicited during external scoping until September 17, 2004. The comments that were received are presented in Appendix A. Most of the comments stated that the regional destination visitor center should be sited at the Folk Art Center site, approximately two miles north of the Blue Ridge Parkway headquarters site. The headquarters of the Southern Highland Craft Guild are located in the Folk Art Center. Southern Highland Craft Guild provides interpretation of the southern Appalachian Mountain culture and also operates the Allandale Craft Shop at the Folk Art Center. Southern Highland Craft Guild artisans sell their crafts in the craft shop. The comments indicated that constructing the regional destination visitor center at the Blue Ridge Parkway headquarters site would negatively affect the livelihoods of the Southern Highland Craft Guild artisans by drawing visitors away from the Folk Art Center.

ISSUES

Issues and concerns affecting this proposal were identified from past National Park Service planning efforts and by input from Blue Ridge Parkway staff, local, state and federal agencies, local and regional organizations, and the general public. The major issues and concerns include:

The Blue Ridge Parkway does not have a visitor center for the overall parkway; therefore, visitors cannot learn about all of the cultural and natural resources located along the Blue Ridge Parkway at one site.

Locating the regional destination visitor center at the headquarters site could result in parkway visitors being intercepted at the visitor center and not stopping at the Folk Art Center for restrooms and parkway information, which may result in Guild artisans losing some impulse sales.

Traffic generated by the regional destination visitor center could cause traffic impacts along the Blue Ridge Parkway and roadways accessing the Blue Ridge Parkway.

IMPACT TOPICS

Impact topics are the resources of concern that could be affected by the range of alternatives. They are used to focus the evaluation of the potential environmental consequences of the alternatives. Specific impact topics were developed for discussion, focus, and to allow comparison of the environmental consequences of each alternative. These impact topics were identified based on federal laws, regulations, and Executive Orders; 2001 National Park Service *Management Policies*; and National Park Service knowledge of limited or easily impacted resources. The following table describes the relevant regulations or policies related to each impact topic.

TABLE I. DERIVATION OF IMPACT TOPICS

Impact Topic	Relevant Regulations or Policies
<u>Retained</u>	
Air Quality:	Federal Clean Air Act (CAA); CAA Amendments of 1990 (CAAA); National Park Service Management Policy, 4.7.1, 2001
Soils:	National Park Service Management Policy 4.8.2.4, 2001
Water Quality:	Executive Order 12088; Executive Order 11990; National Park Service Management Policy 4.6.3, 2001; Federal Water Pollution Control Act [The Clean Water Act of 1972 (as amended in 1977)]; Title 15 A, Subchapter 4B and Subchapter 06 H of the North Carolina Administrative Code.
Wildlife:	Management Policies 2001, Migratory Bird Treaty Act
Vegetation:	National Park Service Management Policy 4.4.2, 2001

TABLE 1. DERIVATION OF IMPACT TOPICS (CONTINUED)

Impact Topic	Relevant Regulations or Policies
<u>Retained Cont'd.</u>	
Historic and cultural resources, and design of the built environment (1502.16):	40 Code of Federal Regulations 1500 (regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act); National Park Service Director's Order #12; Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act
Socioeconomics:	40 Code of Federal Regulations 1500 (regulations for implementing National Environmental Policy Act)
Visitor use and Experience and Viewshed:	National Park Service Organic Act; National Park Service Management Policy 8.2, 2001
Soundscape/Noise:	National Park Service Management Policy 4.9, 2001
Park Operations:	National Park Service Management Policy 9.1, 2001
Transportation:	National Park Service Management Policy 9.2, 2001
Concession Operations and Commercial Services:	National Park Service Management Policy 10.2, 2001
<u>Dismissed</u>	
Ecologically Critical Areas, Wilderness, Wild and Scenic Rivers, or Other Unique Natural Resources:	36 Code of Federal Regulations 62 (criteria for national natural landmarks); National Park Service Management Policies 2001; Wilderness Act of 1964, National Park Service Management Policy 6.3, 2001
Floodplains:	Executive Order 11988 (Floodplain Management)
Wetlands:	Executive Order 11990; Clean Water Act Section 404; National Park Service Director's Order #77-1; Executive Order 11988; National Park Service Management Policy 4.6.4 and 4.6.5,
Special Status Species:	Endangered Species Act of 1973; National Park Service Management Policy 4.4.2.3, 2001; 40 Code of Federal Regulations 1500 (regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act), North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources
Aquatic Resources:	National Park Service Management Policy 4.6, 2001; Federal Water Pollution Control Act [The Clean Water Act of 1972 (as amended in 1977)]; Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act

TABLE I. DERIVATION OF IMPACT TOPICS (CONTINUED)

Impact Topic	Relevant Regulations or Policies
<u>Dismissed Cont'd.</u>	
Geologic Resources:	National Park Service Management Policy 4.8, 2001
Prime and Unique Farmlands:	Council on Environmental Quality 1980 memorandum on prime and unique farmlands; 40 Code of Federal Regulations 1500 (regulations for implementing National Environmental Policy Act, section 1508.27
Natural Lightscape (Night Sky):	National Park Service Management Policy 4.10, 2001
Public Health and Safety:	National Park Service Management Policy 8.2.5, 2001; U.S. Coast Guard Boating Safety Regulations
Sacred Sites	Executive Order 13007; National Park Service Management Policy 5.3.5.3.2, 2001

A brief rationale for the selection of each impact topic is given below, as well as the rationale for dismissing specific topics from further consideration.

Impact Topics Included in This Document

Air Quality: The 1963 Clean Air Act, as amended (42 U.S.C. 7401 et seq.), requires federal land managers to protect air quality, while the 2001 National Park Service *Management Policies* address the need to analyze air quality during park planning. The proposed regional destination visitor center sites are located in Buncombe County, North Carolina, which is currently a designated attainment area, meaning that concentrations of criteria pollutants are within standards. Should an action alternative be selected, local air quality would be temporarily affected by dust and vehicle emissions. Hauling material and operating construction equipment would result in increased vehicle emissions. Volatile organic compounds, ozone, carbon monoxide and sulfur dioxide emissions would generally disperse quickly from the construction area. This would last only as long as construction activities occurred and would have a negligible effect on regional pollutant levels. Fugitive dust plumes from construction equipment and vehicle traffic would intermittently increase airborne particulate concentrations in the area near the project site, depending on soil moisture. This dust would be temporary, highly localized and have a negligible effect on regional particulate levels. Best management practices to control dust would be required during construction. If an alternative is selected that would require reconstruction of an existing building, such as the Folk Art Center, the park must contact the Western North Carolina Regional Air Quality Agency prior to construction to determine if a permit is required for asbestos removal.

In summary, if an action alternative is selected, local air quality in the immediate vicinity could be temporarily degraded by dust generated from site reconstruction activities and emissions from construction equipment and vehicles. There may be increased

automobile emissions from vehicles using the site. For these reasons, air quality is an impact topic that will be discussed in this document.

Soils: This impact topic is retained because of the potential for soil disturbance during the construction activity. Soil grading, compaction, and other construction related activity permanently change the character of the soil.

Water Quality: Construction of buildings and associated amenities could affect water quality during earthmoving activity and through the increase of impervious surface for parking lots and buildings. For this reason, water quality is an impact topic that will be analyzed in this document.

Wildlife: The construction of the project may result in impacts to marginal habitat; therefore wildlife was retained as an impact topic.

Vegetation: The construction of the regional destination visitor center would result in the loss of some second growth trees. Minor habitat changes could occur due to the construction of the visitor center. For these reasons, vegetation is an impact topic that will be analyzed in this document.

Cultural Resources: Construction of the regional destination visitor center at the Hemphill Knob site could result in impacts to an historic masonry box culvert that has been determined to be a contributing resource to the parkway's significance. Also, only portions of the sites being considered have been surveyed. For these reasons, cultural resources is an impact topic that will be analyzed in this document.

Socioeconomics: The construction of the regional destination visitor center in the Asheville area could result in increased tourism in the area. Construction of the regional destination visitor center at the Hemphill Knob site could result in the reduction of income to the artists located at the Folk Art Center. For this reason, socioeconomics is an impact topic that will be analyzed in this document.

Visitor use and Experience / Viewshed: Blue Ridge Parkway visitors, as well as residents of western North Carolina, could be expected to use the regional destination visitor center and would benefit from the experience. The siting of the regional destination visitor center could result in changing the view from the Blue Ridge Parkway in the vicinity of the regional destination visitor center site. For these reasons, visitor use and experience / viewshed is an impact topic that will be analyzed in this document.

Noise / Soundscape: Both the Hemphill Knob site and the Folk Art Center site are currently developed. Natural sounds from birds, frogs and other wildlife are evident at the perimeter of the site, but each of the sites has been disturbed. The construction of the regional destination visitor center at either Hemphill Knob or the Folk Art Center could cause additional disturbance of the site that would result in a negligible further reduction in the natural soundscape. The Folk Art Center site is adjacent to the Veterans Administration Hospital located on U.S. 70 and also a residential area to the south of the site. While the Folk Art Center currently has an amphitheater that faces the hospital,

there would be an amphitheater associated with the regional destination visitor center, as well. In addition, there would be construction noise associated with the regional destination visitor center. For these reasons, noise is an impact topic that will be analyzed in this document.

Park Operations: The regional destination visitor center would be constructed and operated to comply with Section 9.1 of the *2001 National Park Service Management Policies*. The facility would be necessary, appropriate, and consistent with the conservation of park resources and values. The regional destination visitor center would improve park operations by providing a facility for comprehensive interpretation of park resources that is currently not available. For these reasons, park operations will be analyzed in this document.

Transportation: Additional visitors could be attracted to the Blue Ridge Parkway by the regional destination visitor center. The regional destination visitor center could also bring in traffic from the Asheville area, resulting in traffic impacts to public roads in the area. For these reasons, transportation is an impact topic that will be analyzed in this document.

Concessions and Commercial Services: A concession would operate the vending machines or food service at the regional destination visitor center. The theatre would be operated by either a concession or a cooperating association. The marketing center would also be operated by a concession or a cooperating association. Eastern National, a cooperating association, would operate the bookstore. As there could be new concessions associated with the regional destination visitor center, concessions and commercial services will be analyzed in this document.

Impact Topics Dismissed From Further Analysis

Certain potential impact topics were dismissed because these resources would not be affected by the alternatives or the potential for impacts under all alternatives would be negligible. These topics are listed below with the reasons they were not considered.

Ecologically Critical Areas: No congressionally designated natural resources, such as ecologically critical areas, Wilderness, Wild and Scenic Rivers, or other unique natural resources are in the area of concern, and therefore, ecologically critical areas was dismissed as an impact topic in this document.

Floodplains: Federal Emergency Management Agency maps were reviewed to determine potential floodplain involvement with any of the regional destination visitor center alternatives. No floodplains are near the alternative sites. For this reason, floodplains were dismissed as an impact topic in this document.

Wetlands: No wetlands would be affected by this project, according to park staff. For this reason, wetlands were dismissed as an impact topic in this document.

Special Status Species: According to park staff, there are no federally listed plants or animals in the vicinity of any of the alternatives for the proposed project. No impacts to special status species would occur as a result of the implementation of any of the five alternatives.

Aquatic Resources: Aquatic resources are not present in the vicinity of the proposed project. For this reason, aquatic resources were dismissed as an impact topic in this document.

Geological Resources: There are no geological features in or near the alternative sites. For this reason, geological resources were dismissed as an impact topic in this document.

Prime or Unique Farmlands: The Farmland Protection Policy Act and the U.S. Department of the Interior require an evaluation of impacts on prime and unique agricultural lands. These lands require certain soil types and water availability. According to the Natural Resources Conservation Service located in Asheville, there are no prime or unique farmlands within or near the areas proposed for the regional destination visitor center. Because these areas do not exist in the area of concern, this topic was dismissed from further consideration.

Lightscape: Although the regional destination visitor center would be used at night and would have outside lighting during those periods, the location of the regional destination visitor center adjacent to an urban area results in negligible impacts created by the lighting on the lightscape. Regardless, outdoor lights would be shielded to direct the light downward and reduce upward intrusion. For these reasons, lightscape was dismissed as an impact topic in this document.

Public Health and Safety: In the context of activities and park operations, no appreciable effects to public health and safety would be anticipated under any alternative. Appropriate National Park Service requirements and safety codes would be met. For these reasons, public health and safety was dismissed as an impact topic in this document.

Sacred Sites: There are no sacred sites, as defined by Executive Order 13007 near the alternative sites for the regional destination visitor center. For this reason, sacred sites were dismissed as an impact topic in this document.