

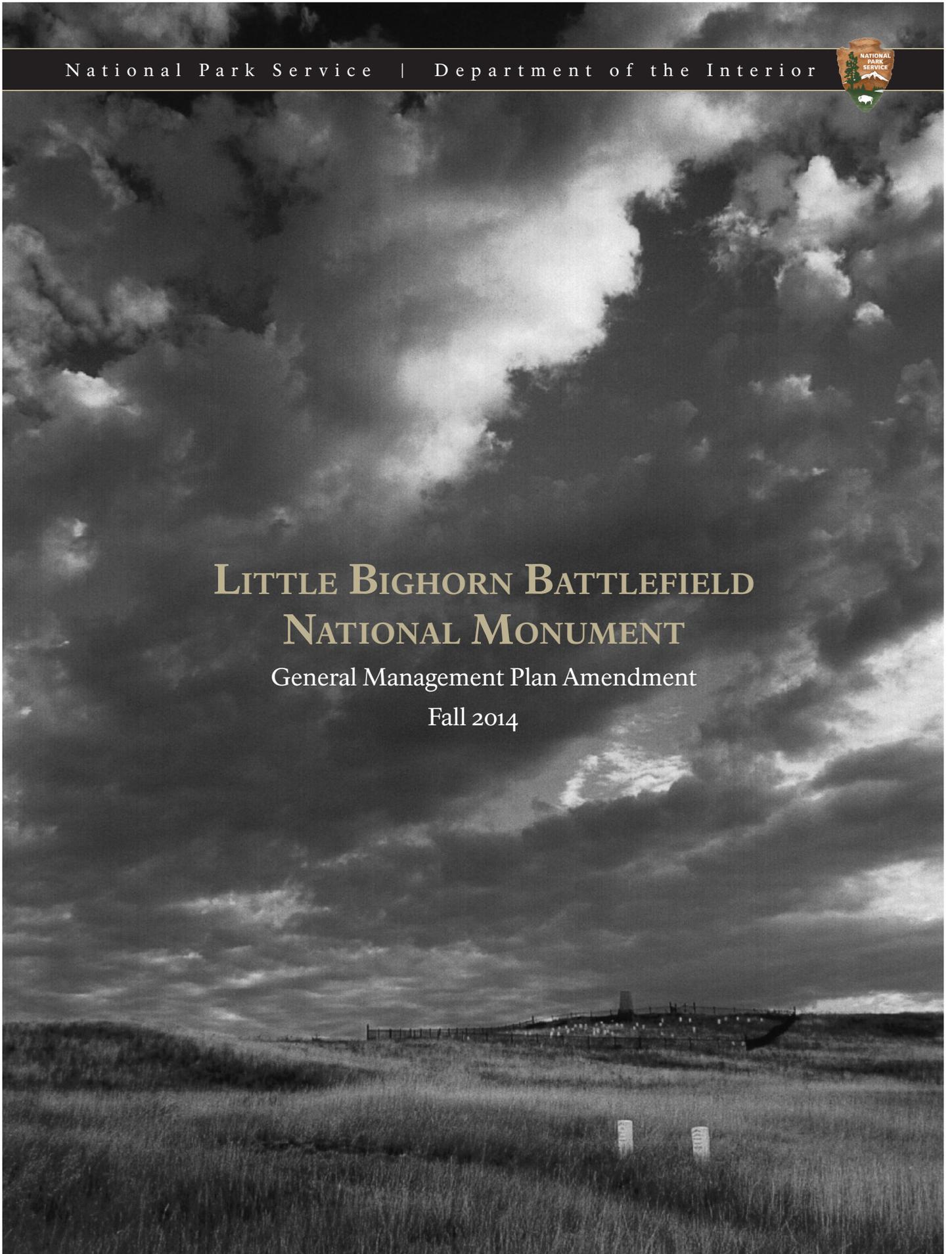
National Park Service | Department of the Interior



LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL MONUMENT

General Management Plan Amendment

Fall 2014



Dear Friends of Little Bighorn
Battlefield National Monument,

Few historic sites capture our imaginations like Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. Here, in 1876, the US Army under Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer met defeat at the hands of Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors who fought to preserve their way of life. To Americans, and the entire world, the monument has achieved iconic (even mythic) status.

Although the national monument faces many pressing issues, the future of the visitor center has been at the forefront of National Park Service (NPS) management concerns for decades. The outdated 62-year-old visitor center does not physically or functionally address the primary objective of comprehensively conveying to visitors one of the most important stories in US history. Interpretive exhibits need updating and building spaces need to be expanded, and/or renovated, to accommodate visitors and staff. An appropriately located visitor center must also incorporate measures to enhance resource protection, visitor experience, and sustainable operations.

Additionally, none of the current buildings at the monument can adequately house the museum and archival collections. The majority of the collection is currently being cared for at the NPS Western Archeological Conservation Center in Tucson, Arizona. The monument still maintains part of the collection on-site (on exhibit, in the library, and in collections storage). We also maintain and can access a number of databases about the collection, digital images, and additional information. Returning all the collections to the park is a high priority for the National Park Service and Little Bighorn's many stakeholders.

In 1986, the National Park Service completed a general management plan for the monument that recommended several actions, including relocating the visitor center and parking lot. In the 28 years since the plan was approved, the National Park Service has made little headway in implementing plan recommendations because of a combination of political issues, controversy over some of the plan's proposals, and uncertainty regarding the building location.

An NPS planning team is beginning work on an amendment to the monument's 28-year-old general management plan that will clarify recommendations regarding capacity, location, and functions (including visitor access and collections storage) of the monument's visitor center.

This fall, we invite interested parties—American Indian tribes, historians, community leaders, monument partners, landowners, and the public—to join us in discussing the management challenges posed by the outdated visitor center, thereby helping to determine the range of reasonable alternatives to be considered for this important structure. Sharing your ideas and concerns for management of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument will strengthen the planning process. Your collaboration will help us make the best decisions for the monument. If you live in the area, please come to the open house event to be held this November where you can learn more about the planning process and share your views on the future of the monument. If you cannot attend the open house, please join us virtually or share your comments electronically or by mail.

I appreciate your interest in Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument and look forward to your participation in charting the future of this significant place!

Sincerely,

Denice Swanke, Superintendent
Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument



WHY IS AN AMENDMENT NEEDED?

When the visitor center was built in 1952, about 100,000 people visited the monument every year. Since then, visitation has tripled and now averages over 300,000 people a year. The monument currently has no auditorium and until 2008 a basement storage room was used to show the monument film. This practice was discontinued because the basement space is not wheelchair accessible and has safety and fire code issues.

Now, visitors must crowd into the visitor center's observation room, which has become the monument's theater, with a capacity of about 30 people at a time. There, they watch the 25-minute monument orientation film. During peak hours of visitation in the summer months, many visitors stand outside the theater in an attempt to see the presentation. These visitors standing outside the observation room trying to see the film often take up one-third of the museum's floor space, further limiting visitor opportunities to see museum exhibits. This results in a poor quality experience for both museum visitors and film viewers. The cramped exhibit space in the current visitor center displays outdated exhibits, which do not reflect a well-defined history of the battlefield or convey diverse perspectives.

To hear a ranger's interpretive talk, visitors have to gather on a patio that typically holds seasonal crowds of up to 150 people. The space affords little protection from inclement weather, extreme temperatures, or the noise of traffic from the nearby road.

In 2011, a decision was made to temporarily relocate the monument museum and archival collections to the Western Archeological Conservation Center. The movement of that portion of the collections to Arizona prompted a strong feeling of anxiety and loss among the tribes whose history is closely tied to Little Bighorn. The National Park Service is committed to returning the collection to the monument. The 1986 plan called for building a new visitor center away from Last Stand Hill. Although some parking and services would have remained on-site, this was seen as a way to partially restore the landscape. When that plan wasn't adopted, the National Park Service considered leasing private property for a new visitor center and sharing the space with a Crow tribal museum. That idea was abandoned, partly because there wasn't enough money in the budget to maintain the lease and the possibility of complications with a shared space.

Another issue is "where to put the visitor center"? The National Park Service once believed that in all national park units it was best to keep buildings close to main attractions, such as Last Stand Hill. More recently, the National Park Service has focused on restoring historic landscapes. Would moving the visitor center enhance or undermine the visitor experience?

The National Park Service also proposed temporarily expanding the visitor center. Approved by the National Park Service in 2008, the expansion would have included a large multipurpose room and provided improved exhibit space, among other benefits. Some park advocates opposed the plan because of the impact the construction would have on the landscape, and because it seemed to be a retreat from the goal of moving the facilities off-site. These concerns led the National Park Service to withdraw approval of the plan, and the out-of-date visitor center has remained largely untouched ever since.

A general management plan amendment is needed to provide clear guidance for the most appropriate location and future management of the visitor center. The amendment will reconsider recommendations identified in the 1986 plan and in subsequent planning efforts. It will explore existing and new alternatives related to the location and functions of the visitor center and include a "no-action" alternative that will serve as a baseline to compare the action alternatives against.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

We need to hear your ideas and concerns for the issues related to the monument's visitor center! Comments can be sent by mail, shared at an open house event, or submitted electronically. Please consider the questions listed on the enclosed comment form in addition to any other thoughts and ideas you may have. Receiving your input before December 15, 2014, will allow us to incorporate your ideas early in the planning process. Thank you.

Share your comments electronically:

Complete the electronic version of the comment form on the website at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/libi> (click on "General Management Plan Amendment" and then "Open for Comment").

Share your comments at an open house:

You can provide comments (verbally or in writing) at an upcoming open house event. We invite you to attend the open house to talk with the planning team firsthand about your ideas, experiences, and questions.

OPEN HOUSE

November 5, 2014 | 7 p.m.

Super 8 | 201 14th Street

Interstate 90 Exit 495 | Hardin, Mt 59034

Virtual Open House:

November 12, 2014 at 7 p.m. (mountain time zone)

Call-in and webinar information will be available on the website at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/libi>



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