

**U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**Development Concept Plan / Environmental Assessment:
Proposed Regional Destination Visitor Center**

**Blue Ridge Parkway
Buncombe County, North Carolina**

Summary

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).

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.

There are twelve visitor centers located along the 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 parkway are generally oriented toward the unique attributes of that particular attraction, according to parkway staff. The parkway has no primary visitor center that provides interpretation of the overall parkway, its history and its resources.

The National Park Service is considering a proposal to construct a new regional destination visitor center at the Blue Ridge Parkway in Buncombe County, North Carolina. The primary purposes of the regional destination visitor center are:

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.

There are five alternatives for locating the Blue Ridge Parkway regional destination visitor center. The alternatives include a no action alternative and four action alternatives.

Alternative A, no action would continue the present management operation and condition. It does not imply or direct discontinuing the present action or removing existing uses, developments, or facilities. Alternative A (no action) provides a basis for comparing the management direction and environmental consequences of Alternative B (preferred alternative) and the other alternatives. Should Alternative A, no action, be selected, the National Park Service would respond to future needs and conditions associated with the park's objectives without major actions or changes from the present course.

Action Alternatives. The action alternatives present the National Park Service's proposed action and alternatives for the project that were developed to achieve the purposes stated above. These alternatives define the rationale for the action in terms of resource protection and management, visitor use and operational use, costs, and other applicable factors. The National Park Service has adopted the concept of sustainable design as a guiding principle of facility planning and development. The objectives of sustainability are to:

- Design park facilities to minimize adverse effects on natural and cultural values, reflect their environmental setting, and maintain and encourage biodiversity;
- Construct and retrofit facilities using energy-efficient materials and building techniques;
- Operate and maintain facilities to promote their sustainability; and
- Illustrate and promote conservation principles and practices through sustainable design and ecologically sensitive use.

Alternative B (preferred) subscribes to and supports the practice of sustainable planning and design to accomplish the regional destination visitor center. The preferred alternative was selected because its qualities best met the following criteria that define the environmentally preferred alternative in Section 101(b) of the National Environmental Policy Act.

- Fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations (Advantage – Alternatives B and C),
- Assure for all generations, safe, healthful, productive, and esthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings (Advantage – Alternative B),
- Attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk of health or safety, or other undesirable or unintended consequences (Advantage – Alternative B),
- Preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage and maintain, wherever possible, an environment that supports diversity and variety of individual choice (Advantage – Alternatives B and C),
- Achieve a balance between population and resource use that will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities (Advantage – Alternative E) and,

Enhance the quality of renewable resources and approach the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources (Advantage – Alternatives D).

Alternative B had the advantage in four of the six criteria, placing higher than Alternatives C, D, and E.

In addition, the National Park System uses a selection and ranking process based on the relative advantages and costs of each project in accomplishing service-wide goals and objectives. This process is called Choosing by Advantage. Projects compete against each other in the Choosing by Advantage process that evaluates all of the projects relative to the following factors that reflect the National Park Service mission:

- Protecting cultural and natural resources

- Provide for visitor enjoyment

- Improve efficiency of park operations

- Provide cost-effective, environmentally responsible, and otherwise beneficial development for the National Park Service

Alternative B outscored Alternatives C, D, and E in the Choosing by Advantage process. Cost is then introduced into the process, creating an importance-to-cost ratio. Alternative B also had the advantage of being the least cost alternative, and therefore was the decisive winner in the overall Choosing by Advantage process.

Alternatives C, D, and E provide optional sites for the build alternative. Alternatives B and C are located at Milepost 384 of the parkway to the east of Asheville, North Carolina, at the Hemphill Knob site, the current location of the Blue Ridge Parkway headquarters. Alternatives D and E are located at Milepost 382 of the parkway at the Folk Art Center site.

This environmental assessment analyzes the proposed action and alternatives and their impacts on the environment. None of the alternatives would result in impairment of park resources.

Public Comment

Public comment will be accepted for 30 days, through July 30, 2005. Your comments on this document can be submitted electronically using the NPS web-based Planning, Environment & Public Comment (PEPC) system. To download the document for review and comment, go to the following website: <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/>

- Select the link “Plans/Documents Open for Comment” located at the lower left corner of the page.

- From the “Plan/Document List” select the link “Draft.”

- To download the document to your computer select the Draft Development Concept Plan / Environmental Assessment for the Proposed Regional Destination Visitor Center from the “Document Content” list.

- Make comments on the document by selecting the link “Comment on Document” in the menu on the left side of the page and submit your comments using the “Comment Form.”

In lieu of submitting your comments using PEPC, you may also send them to Superintendent, Blue Ridge Parkway, 199 Hemphill Knob Road, Asheville, North Carolina 28803. Copies of the

document may also be requested by writing the above address, or by calling (828) 271-4779 ext. 219.

It is the practice of the National Park Service to make comments, including names and addresses of respondents, available for public review. An individual respondent may request that we withhold his or her address from the record, which we will honor to the extent allowable by law. We will make all submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, available for public inspection in their entirety.