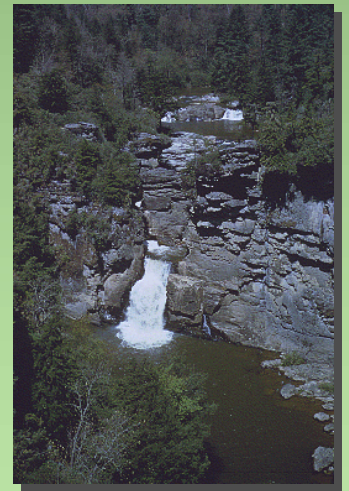




FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Development Concept Plan - Environmental Assessment Proposed Regional Destination Visitor Center



September 2005

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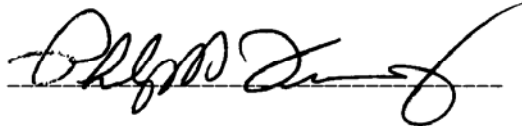
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Regional Destination Visitor Center Blue Ridge Parkway

The preferred alternative does not constitute an action that normally requires preparation of an environmental impact statement. The preferred alternative would not have a significant effect on the human environment. Adverse environmental impacts that could occur are negligible, minor, or moderate in intensity. There are no significant impacts on public health, public safety, threatened or endangered species, sites or districts listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or other unique characteristics of the region. No highly uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, significant cumulative effects, or elements of precedence were identified. Implementation of the action would not violate any federal, state, or local environmental protection law.

Based on the foregoing, it has been determined that an EIS is not required for this project and thus will not be prepared.

Recommended:

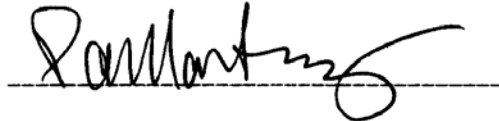


Philip A. Francis, Jr.
Acting Superintendent, Blue Ridge Parkway

9/14/05

Date

Approved:



Patricia Hooks
for Director, Southeast Region

9/18/05

Date

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Regional Destination Visitor Center for the Blue Ridge Parkway

Introduction

The Blue Ridge Parkway (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 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 (NPS) data indicates that annual recreational visitation on the entire parkway rose from 16.9 million in 1990 to 19.2 million in 2000 (National Park Service, 2004c).

There are 12 visitor centers located along the Parkway that offer services ranging from gift and craft sales to 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 and its resources.

The primary purpose of the Regional Destination Visitor Center (Center) is:

1. Interpretation of natural and cultural resources along the Parkway via an entertaining, immersive, and interactive format in which the public can participate through the use of state-of-the-art-technology.
2. 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).
3. Information and orientation to the Parkway and link the public to community functions and attractions within the Asheville community and the greater Western North Carolina region.

PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

The NPS is considering the construction of a Center for the Parkway near Asheville, North Carolina. The Preferred Alternative is at Hemphill Knob at the east end of the existing visitor parking lot for the Parkway Headquarters facility (Alternative B).

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

The NPS has considered two locations for the Center. One location is at Parkway mile marker 382.0 at the Folk Art Center site and the other location is at mile marker 384.1 at the Parkway Headquarters site at Hemphill Knob. There are two alternative sites at each location. In addition, the No Action Alternative was considered throughout the process. The following provides a brief description of these alternatives. The alternatives are described in full detail in the Development Concept Plan/Environmental Assessment (DCP/EA).

Alternative A (No Action)

The No Action alternative is the baseline condition against which proposed activities are compared. It is defined as taking no action to change or alter current management. Currently, visitor centers are located at 12 locations along the Parkway. Many of these visitor centers are primarily visitor contact stations that supply trail maps, publications and local area information. Interpretive programs, if available, are generally limited to the local features of that particular attraction. Under Alternative A, the current park interpretation and operational programs would continue, and there would be no single location where interpretation of the cultural and historic features of the overall Parkway would be presented. Information and orientation to the Parkway in the Asheville area would be limited to the visitor information that is available at the Folk Art Center. Any links to community functions and attractions within the Asheville community and the greater Western North Carolina region would be provided at sites away from the Parkway, such as the Greater Asheville Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center. Should the No Action Alternative be selected, the NPS would respond to future needs and conditions without major actions or changes in the present course.

Alternative B (Preferred Alternative)

In 1981, the United States Congress established legislation for the NPS to purchase the Hemphill Knob property for a new Headquarters and visitor center. This site was chosen after an extensive search, based primarily on ease of access from the Parkway and local area interstate highways. The existing Headquarters building lies at a relatively level location approximately 1/4 to 1/3 of the way up the slope (knob) that offers generally open views of surrounding mountains, including Mount Pisgah to the west. Parking areas are located on both the northwest and northeast sides of the Headquarters building. The visitor parking area located to the northeast of the Headquarters building is comprised of 29 parking stalls with a wide lawn median and an adjacent level grade lawn area that together serve as the foreground to the Headquarters building. The 59 parking stalls located to the northwest of the Headquarters building serve as employee parking.

The Center building in Alternative B would be located within a portion of the wooded area directly east of the visitor parking area, removing a portion of an existing pine forest in decline.

Visitors may drop passengers off at the visitor arrival area that includes an architectural focal point that forms a vista to the site entry road and an interpretive plaza. The plaza allows interpretation of local heritage, history, culture and Parkway construction through the use of signage or other exhibits. It would also allow visitors to take advantage of the natural setting and mountain views to the west. This plaza would be tied to the interior uses by a north-south axis and open views through the building.

The Center and Headquarters would be separate buildings and operations, yet they would have a visual relationship. Much of the proposed parking and associated perimeter road for the Center would be confined within the cleared, relatively flat portion of the site established during the Headquarters planning and construction. This would reduce the amount of additional site disturbance and grading. The design team estimated that 239 parking stalls would be available at the Hemphill Knob site, including the 59 Headquarters employee stalls for overflow parking needs on evenings and weekends.

In addition to parking and the interpretive plaza, other site features such as the outdoor class, trails to both the mountain to sea trail and Hemphill Knob and interpretive gardens would complement the features located within the 11,000 square foot Center building. The 2,360 square foot building entrance area would contain a lobby with exhibits, an information desk, and restrooms on the main floor. A 700 square foot gift shop would be located to the north of the information desk and a 1,235 square foot Parkway information center would be located to the east of the gift shop. A 1,100 square foot regional information center would be located to the south of the Parkway information center. The 70 seat immersive digital theatre would be located to the north of the Parkway information center. Administrative offices would be located to the north of the gift shop. The 1,150 square foot education center would be located on the lower floor, along with storage and mechanical areas. Alternative B is estimated to cost approximately \$9.2 million to construct, including contingencies.

Alternative C

Alternative C would also be located at Hemphill Knob. This alternative would share some similar features with Alternative B. The majority of the proposed parking and the perimeter road around the parking would be confined within the relatively flat building pad established during the Headquarters planning and construction. This alternative also would provide 239 parking stalls, similar to the number for Alternative B. Alternative C would contain the same program elements as Alternative B and each element would be approximately the same square footage as Alternative B. However, the layout could vary from Alternative B, due to the unique topographic characteristics and interior-exterior relationships of each site. Alternative B has a linear building to site relationship, while alternative C is less linear. The building in this alternative would be located east of and closely adjacent to the ravine located below the pedestrian bridge leading to the Headquarters building. Alternative C would take advantage of westward views to Mount Pisgah from the proposed building and interpretive plaza and a more wooded “tree house” setting.

Visitors arriving at this site by bus or car may take an immediate left to the circular arrival area. This focal point would include a drop off and interpretive plaza and aligns on axis with the proposed building, parking and pedestrian bridge of the Headquarters building. Alternative C is estimated to cost approximately \$9.4 million to construct, including contingencies.

Alternative D

This alternative is located at the Folk Art Center site at mile marker 382 of the Parkway. Alternative D expands and renovates the existing Folk Art Center building to accommodate the functions of the Folk Art Center and the Center. This building addition joins at the existing theater area on the east side of the Folk Art Center building. Existing Folk Art Center programs would be linked and complementary to new Center programs. Access to the site is provided by an existing 250 foot long northbound to westbound entrance turn lane located in the median of the Parkway.

Visitors arriving at the site by car would drive past the building and the entrance area to the parking facility located on the eastern portion of the site. After visitors drive through the entrance road and park their vehicles, they would walk to the visitor arrival location that includes an interpretive plaza. Visitors by bus or recreational vehicle would be dropped off at the entrance plaza.

Approximately 336 parking stalls would be required for the Folk Art Center site for this alternative. A larger number of stalls are required for Alternative D due to the co-location of Center and Folk Art Center functions within the same building and site, and the potential increased length of stay due to this co-location. The required parking is accommodated primarily through an added level of surface parking east of and at a lower topographic elevation than existing parking bays.

In addition to parking and an interpretive plaza, other site program components include an interpretive theme garden, an immersive digital theatre, an educational center, a regional information center, outdoor classes, an artisan demonstration area, and trails through the site and a connector that leads to the mountain to sea trail. Alternative D is estimated to cost \$10.2 million to construct, including contingencies.

Alternative E

This alternative is also located at the Folk Art Center site, but unlike alternative D, this site utilizes a separate building for the Center. The new Center building is located as a vista for drivers on the site entry road. This entry road continues past the front of the new building to the car parking area. The Center building and the Folk Art Center building would relate to one another via a shared entrance/arrival area to include a drop-off motor court and interpretive plaza. Visitors by bus or recreational vehicle may drop off passengers, then proceed to the turnaround, then drive back to a bus/recreational vehicle/employee/volunteer parking area

located west of the Folk Art Center building in similar fashion to alternative D. The parking area for buses, employees and volunteers is in the same location as Alternative D.

While this alternative utilizes the same number of parking stalls as alternative D (337), the stalls in this concept are arranged in a multilevel parking deck that utilizes the sloped character of the site. One level would be partially covered by a level above it. Alternative E would contain features similar to the Preferred Alternative and each feature would be approximately the same size as Alternative B. However, the layout could vary from Alternative B, due to the unique topographic characteristics of each site. Alternative E construction is estimated to cost approximately \$12.2 million to construct, including contingencies.

THE ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

The environmentally preferred alternative is the alternative that would best promote the national environmental policy expressed in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The environmentally preferred alternative would cause the least damage to the biological and physical environment, and would best protect, preserve, and enhance historical, cultural, and natural resources.

Section 101(b) of NEPA identifies six criteria to help determine the environmentally preferred alternative. The act directs that Federal plans should:

1. Fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations;
2. Assure for all generations safe, healthful, productive, and esthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings;
3. Attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk of health or safety, or other undesirable and unintended consequences;
4. 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;
5. Achieve a balance between population and resource use that would permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities; and
6. Enhance the quality of renewable resources and approach the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources.

The NPS has determined that Alternative B is the environmentally preferred alternative. Alternative B satisfied each of the six criteria and was best at satisfying three of the six criteria, more than any other alternative. Generally, Alternative B was selected as the environmentally preferred alternative due to its preferred spatial orientation to the Parkway Headquarters and because it would not affect the proposed expansion of the Folk Art Center. These factors influenced many of the six criteria for the selection of the environmentally preferred alternative.

WHY THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE WILL NOT HAVE A SIGNIFICANT EFFECT ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

As defined in 40 CFR §1508.27, significance is determined by examining the following criteria:

Impacts that may have both beneficial and adverse aspects and which on balance may be beneficial, but that may still have significant adverse impacts which require analysis in an Environmental Impact Statement:

No major adverse impacts were identified that would require analysis in an Environmental Impact Statement. No impacts to ecologically critical areas, floodplains, wetlands, special status species, aquatic resources, geological resources, prime or unique farmlands, lightscape, public health and safety, and sacred sites were identified for the preferred alternative. Negligible impacts to soils, water quality, wildlife, and vegetation were identified for the preferred alternative. Minor adverse impacts to air quality (short term), noise/soundscape (short term), and transportation (short and long term) were identified for the preferred alternative. Minor to moderate adverse impacts to socioeconomics (long term), and concession operations (long term) were identified for the preferred alternative. Possible moderate adverse effects to cultural resources (long term) were identified for the preferred alternative. In addition, moderate to major beneficial impacts to visitor use and experience (long term) were identified, as well as moderate beneficial impacts to park operations (long term).

Degree of effect on public health or safety:

Public access is currently open to the Hemphill Knob Headquarters site, but visitation by the general public is infrequent as the Headquarters is not designated as a visitor center. During construction, construction vehicles, equipment, or material would be stored inside a designated construction area that would be off-limits to the general public. Impacts would be adverse, but minor and short-term, lasting only as long as construction. Operation of the Center would not jeopardize public health or safety.

Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas:

As described in the DCP/EA, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, and ecologically critical areas would not be affected.

The Center would be constructed within the boundaries of the Parkway property, but it would not affect any current uses in the park. The preferred action is intended to benefit the park visitor by creating a multi-media visitor center that would add to the interpretation of the park and the enjoyment of the visitor.

The construction of a northbound to westbound left turn lane at the Parkway/Hemphill Knob driveway would result in the reconstruction of a box culvert that has been identified as a contributing element to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) - eligible district and proposed National Historic Landmark. This reconstruction would result in a moderate, long term, adverse effect on a contributing element of the NRHP – eligible Parkway. The impact could be partially mitigated by reconstructing the exposed elements of the culvert using the removed stone materials and following the original design of the culvert.

Although no NRHP – listed or NRHP – eligible archaeological sites have been identified in the Area of Potential Effects for the preferred alternative, the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) considers several areas beyond the previously surveyed areas to have a high probability for the presence of prehistoric or historic archaeological sites. Linear corridors for infrastructure could occur in undeveloped areas with intact archaeological sites, some of which may be NRHP – eligible. As a result, all of the build alternatives could have a moderate, long term, local adverse effect on archaeological resources located in the infrastructure corridors. Archeological survey of the areas of potential impact will occur before construction activities take place. The impact of the project on any cultural resources identified will be considered and mitigated before construction begins.

Degree to which effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial:

During preparation of the DCP/EA, a number of Southern Highland Craft Guild members indicated that the construction of the Center at Hemphill Knob could result in reduced visitation at the Folk Art Center. The reduction in visitation at the Folk Art Center could result in a reduction of sales at the Allanstand Craft Shop, which in turn could result in a reduction of income to the Guild artisans that sell their crafts at the Allanstand Craft Shop. However, in early July 2005, the Board of Trustees of the Southern Highland Craft Guild adopted a resolution supporting the location of the Center at the Hemphill Knob site and further indicated that the Folk Art Center alternatives were not viable. Only one person at the public hearing spoke against locating the visitor center at the Hemphill Knob site due to the economic impact on the artisans of the Allanstand Craft Shop. However, the park did receive 39 comments during the public hearing process that recommended the Center be located at the Folk Art Center site.

Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks:

Based on information from NPS staff, it was assumed that most of the crafts sold at the Allanstand Craft Shop in the Folk Art Center were purchased by visitors destined to the Folk Art Center, and not by the casual visitor who stopped at the Folk Art Center to use the restroom or other visitor center facilities. As a result, the reduced visitation anticipated for the Folk Art Center due to the introduction of the Center at the Hemphill Knob site, only 2

miles from the Folk Art Center, was not assumed to have a major adverse effect on the income of the artisans at the Allanstand Craft Shop due to loss of sales.

Degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration:

The preferred alternative neither establishes a NPS precedent for future actions with significant effects nor represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts:

When considered as an individual project, negligible impacts to soils, water quality, wildlife, and vegetation were identified for the preferred alternative. Minor adverse impacts to air quality (short term), noise/soundscape (short term), and transportation (short and long term) were identified for the preferred alternative. Minor to moderate adverse impacts to socioeconomics (long term), and concession operations (long term) were identified for the preferred alternative. Possible moderate adverse effects to cultural resources (long term) were identified for the preferred alternative. In addition, moderate to major beneficial impacts to visitor use and experience (long term) were identified, as well as moderate beneficial impacts to park operations (long term).

However, there are other public and private projects that are planned in the area, as identified in the DCP/EA. These other projects would have the following combined effects on the area of influence of the preferred alternative:

- No effect--Soils, noise/soundscape, commercial services.
- Negligible adverse effect--air quality, water quality.
- Negligible to minor adverse effect--vegetation, transportation.
- Minor adverse effect--wildlife, cultural resources, park operations.
- Minor beneficial effect--socioeconomics, visitor use and experience.

Degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed on NRHP or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources:

As described in the DCP/EA, the preferred alternative would have a moderate, long term adverse effect on a box culvert which is a contributing element of the NRHP--eligible Parkway. However, rehabilitation of the masonry box culvert in conjunction with the road widening could result in a long term beneficial effect by recreating the architectural features compatible with other contributing elements of the Parkway. Also, as SHPO considers several areas beyond the previously surveyed areas to have a high probability for the presence of prehistoric or historic archaeological sites, the preferred alternative could have a moderate, long term, local adverse effect on archaeological resources located in the project

area. Archeological survey of the areas of potential impact will occur before construction activities take place. The impact of the project on any cultural resources identified will be considered and mitigated before construction begins.

Degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its critical habitat:

As described in the DCP/EA, no threatened, endangered or candidate species or species of special concern are known to inhabit Hemphill Knob or the general vicinity. There is no critical habitat at Hemphill Knob or the general vicinity.

Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local environmental protection law:

The preferred alternative violates no Federal, State, or local environmental protection laws.

IMPAIRMENT OF PARK RESOURCES OR VALUES

In addition to reviewing the list of significance criteria, the NPS and the Parkway determined that implementation of the preferred alternative would not constitute an impairment of the Parkway's resources and values. This conclusion is based on a thorough analysis of the impacts described in the DCP/EA, the agency and public comments received, and the professional judgment of the decision-maker in accordance with the NPS's *Management Policies, 2001* (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2000). As described in the DCP/EA, implementation of the preferred alternative would not result in major, adverse impacts to a resource or value whose conservation is (1) necessary to fulfill specific purposes identified in the establishing legislation or proclamation of the Parkway; (2) key to the natural or cultural integrity of the Parkway; or (3) identified as a goal in the Parkway's General Management Plan or other relevant NPS planning documents.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The DCP/EA was made available for public review and comment for more than 30 days during a period ending July 30, 2005. Local, State and Federal agencies reviewed the DCP/EA to determine if the Center would impact any of the resources that they were created to protect. The following paragraphs are a summary of these agency comments.

The SHPO reviewed the DCP/EA and indicated that they would have no objection to implementing Alternatives B or C located at the Hemphill Knob site. They did indicate that a Phase I archaeological survey should be performed on the site prior to construction. Their correspondence indicated that Alternatives D and E, located at the Folk Art Center site, were adjacent to the National Register listed Oteen Veterans Administration Hospital Historic District

and that the project could have an adverse affect on the historic district if it was located at the Folk Art Center.

The United States Department of the Interior Fish and Wildlife Service also reviewed the DCP/EA and indicated that they would have no objections to any of the alternatives for the Center. There are no federally listed species or their habitats on either of the sites.

The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission also reviewed the DCP/EA and indicated that the site disturbance is small and the effect on aquatic resources is negligible. However, they indicated that black bears frequently travel the Parkway corridor in annual dispersal periods and in breeding season. They recommended that all garbage facilities located at the Center be bear proofed. They also recommended that bear-proof garbage systems be made a part of the education package at the center. As a result of these comments, the NPS will comply with the request to install bear proof garbage collection systems and will also include this as a part of the public education program to encourage homeowners to follow the NPS example. The NPS will coordinate with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission prior to the development of the solid waste program for the park.

A public hearing was held on the evening of July 12, 2005 at Simpson Hall of the Asheville – Buncombe Technical Community College. The hearing was attended by 9 citizens and interest groups. Overall, fifty-eight (58) responses were received from the public during the 30 day period. Nearly 70 percent of the comments recommended locating the Center at the Folk Art Center site.

Responses to the public comments are provided in the Errata Sheet attached to this document. Some of the 58 responses contained more than one comment or question, so the number of comments identified below will add to more than 58.

All comments received in response to the scoping notices have been duly considered and will remain in the project administrative record.

Errata Sheet

Regional Destination Visitor Center Blue Ridge Parkway

Part 1 - A summary of the comments made during the 30-day public review of the Design Concept Plan/Environmental Assessment (DCP/EA) and the response to those comments follows:

1. Alternative A, the No Action Alternative, should be adopted (one comment)

The primary purpose of the Regional Destination Visitor Center (Center) is:

- a. Interpretation of natural and cultural resources along the Blue Ridge Parkway (Parkway) via an entertaining, immersive, and interactive format in which the public can participate through the use of state-of-the-art-technology.
- b. 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).
- c. Information and orientation to the Parkway and to link the public to community functions and attractions within the Asheville community and the greater Western North Carolina region.

While implementation of the No Action Alternative would produce no adverse affects on the environment in the area, it would also produce no beneficial affects. The primary purpose of the Center would not be achieved with the No Action Alternative.

2. Alternative C, the western Hemphill Knob Alternative, seems to be the only viable option (1 comment)

Alternative B, the preferred alternative, was chosen using a Value Analysis/Choosing by Advantage process. The first step of the process was to identify a number of evaluation criteria and then score each alternative as to the degree that particular alternative satisfied each criteria. In the Choosing by Advantage Process, Alternative C (formerly Alternative A' in the Choosing by Advantage process) scored 500 points, second to Alternative B (formerly Alternative B'), the preferred alternative, which scored 550 points. In the Value Analysis part of the process, the cost of constructing the alternative was also considered. Alternative C was more costly to construct than was the preferred alternative. As a result, the overall benefit to cost ratio was 62.5 for the preferred alternative and 54.3 for Alternative C.

In addition, Alternative B was selected as the environmentally preferred alternative, as defined by Section 101(b) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Section 101(b) identifies six criteria to help determine the environmentally preferred alternative. Alternative B has the advantage in three of the six criteria, while Alternative C has the advantage in only one of the criteria.

Additional information on the Value Analysis/Choosing by Advantage process and the environmentally preferred alternative is available in the DCP/EA.

3. Alternative D, reconstruction and expansion of the Folk Art Center, should be selected as the preferred alternative (36 comments)

Alternative B, the preferred alternative, was chosen using a Value Analysis/Choosing by Advantage process. The first step of the process was to identify a number of evaluation criteria and then score each alternative as to the degree that particular alternative satisfied each criteria. In the Choosing by Advantage Process, Alternative D (formerly Alternative C' in the Choosing by Advantage process) scored 260 points, while Alternative B (formerly Alternative B'), the preferred alternative, scored 550 points. In the Value Analysis part of the process, the cost of constructing the alternative was also considered. The existing facilities at the Folk Art Center are not adequate to serve both the Center programs and the Folk Art Center programs. The reconstruction and expansion of the Folk Art Center, Alternative D, would be more costly to construct than was the construction of a new facility for the preferred alternative. As a result, the overall benefit to cost ratio was 62.5 for the preferred alternative and 24.5 for Alternative D.

In addition, Alternative B was selected as the environmentally preferred alternative, as defined by Section 101(b) of NEPA. Section 101(b) identifies six criteria to help determine the environmentally preferred alternative. Alternative B has the advantage in three of the six criteria, while Alternative D has the advantage in only one of the criteria.

Additional information on the Value Analysis/Choosing by Advantage process and the environmentally preferred alternative is available in the DCP/EA.

4. Alternative E, construction of a new separate Center at the Folk Art Center site, should be selected as the preferred alternative (four comments)

Alternative B, the preferred alternative, was chosen using a Value Analysis/Choosing by Advantage process. The first step of the process was to identify a number of evaluation criteria and then score each alternative as to the degree that particular alternative satisfied each criteria. In the Choosing by Advantage Process, Alternative E (formerly Alternative D' in the Choosing by Advantage process) scored 50 points, while Alternative B (formerly Alternative B'), the preferred alternative, scored 550 points. In the Value Analysis part of the process, the cost of constructing the alternative was also considered. The construction of Alternative E was more costly to construct than was the construction of Alternative B, the preferred alternative. As a result, the overall benefit to cost ratio was 62.5 for the preferred alternative and 4.1 for Alternative E.

In addition, Alternative B was selected as the environmentally preferred alternative, as defined by Section 101(b) of NEPA. Section 101(b) identifies six criteria to help determine the

environmentally preferred alternative. Alternative B has the advantage in three of the six criteria, while Alternative E has the advantage in only two of the criteria.

Additional information on the Value Analysis/Choosing by Advantage process and the environmentally preferred alternative is available in the DCP/EA.

- 5. A marketing center with a large capacity cinema should not be developed as part of the Center. The Center should be developed essentially as described in the DCP/EA (one comment).**

The DCP/EA indicates that the Center would include a 1,100 square foot regional information center and a 70 seat immersive digital theatre. This is the current plan for these components of the visitor center and is also the basis for approval of the DCP/EA. Any significant deviation from the current plan would result in the requirement for a modification to the DCP/EA and additional public review of the proposed changes.

- 6. The Center should be open on Saturday and Sunday afternoons (one comment).**

The Center would be open 7 days per week from 9:00 AM to 6:00 p.m. Facilities at the center would also be available for after hour's rentals for special events that are compatible with the mission of the Parkway. The Center would be open 364 days per year and closed only on Christmas day.

- 7. The parking requirements (237 spaces at the Hemphill Knob sites or 336 spaces at the Folk Art Center sites) for the Center seem excessive compared to other visitor centers (3 comments).**

The parking requirement for the Hemphill Knob sites (Alternative B (preferred alternative) and Alternative C) is 180 spaces. The additional spaces mentioned in the comment refer to the existing Parkway Headquarter employee parking spaces that would be available for overflow parking after normal Headquarter business hours (evenings and weekends). As there are 59 parking spaces located in the Headquarters employee parking lot, the total spaces available would be 239 spaces at Hemphill Knob, including overflow parking. The parking requirement for the Folk Art Center site is 336 spaces, as mentioned in the comment. The additional spaces are required to accommodate visitation at both the Center and the Folk Art Center. There is no on-site overflow parking available at the Folk Art Center site.

The parking requirement for the Center alternatives may seem high when compared to other NPS visitor centers. A large share of the higher parking requirement is due to the assumption that the average visitor would spend 60 minutes at the Hemphill Knob site visitor center alternatives and 75 minutes at the Folk Art Center site alternatives. The NPS estimates that visitors spend 30 minutes at a traditional park visitor center. The longer visitation is due to the increased attractions available at the Parkway Center. This length of visitation factor alone would result in doubling the parking requirement for the Hemphill Knob alternatives

and increasing parking by a factor of 2.5 for the Folk Art Center alternatives. Appendix C of the DCP/EA describes the assumptions used to calculate the parking requirement for each alternative.

- 8. The environmental impacts of the Center should be evaluated as part of an EIS instead of an EA. The commenter indicated that the Center would have significant environmental impacts (one comment).**

If it is not certain whether environmental impacts of a proposed action would be significant, an EA is performed to make that determination. If the EA determines that the proposed action would have significant impacts, then an EIS is prepared. If the EA determines that the proposed action would have no significant impacts, then a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) statement is prepared. The Parkway Center DCP/EA determined that no significant impacts would occur as a result of construction and operation of the proposed action. Therefore, a FONSI was prepared (see above).

- 9. The Center should not be used to promote local business enterprises (3 comments).**

As stated in the response to comment No. 1, the primary purpose of the Center is:

- a. Interpretation of natural and cultural resources along the Parkway via an entertaining, immersive, and interactive format in which the public can participate through the use of state-of-the-art technology.
- b. 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).
- c. Information and orientation to the Parkway and to link the public to community functions and attractions within the Asheville community and the greater Western North Carolina region.

The first and second purposes of the Center are interpretation and education of Parkway resources and history. The third purpose of the center is to provide an orientation to the Parkway and also provide a link to community functions and attractions in the Asheville and Western North Carolina area. This link identifies the regional context and related resources, but is not intended to promote any particular commercial activity. This connection to the region is intended to provide a service to the Parkway visitor by providing information on local and regional activities and directions on accessing these activities from the Parkway. This regional information center consumes a small portion of the visitor center complex, but is an important service to the Parkway visitor.

- 10. The Center is planned to have 1,900 square feet of space near the theater devoted to promoting businesses in Western North Carolina. This space should be reduced. The commenter is also concerned about the relationship between the**

theater programs and this promotional area. The theater programs should not be promoting regional events and businesses (one comment).

The area described in this comment is intended to provide information and orientation to Parkway visitors regarding local and regional activities, and is not intended to promote any particular business (see response to comment No. 9). The size of the information area would be 1,100 square feet. The programs shown in the theater would cover history of the Parkway or interpretation of Parkway resources, and would not be a promotion of local attractions or businesses.

11. Construction of the Center at Hemphill Knob would downgrade the Folk Art Center into nothing and also severely impact the artisans of the Southern Highland Craft Guild (6 comments).

The Parkway staff has estimated that 2/3 of the current visitors at the Folk Art Center were destined to the Folk Art Center and only 1/3 of the visitors were using the Folk Art Center as a traditional park visitor center (National Park Service, 2004d). In addition, staff estimated that the vast majority of crafts sold at the Allanstand Craft Shop were sold to the visitors destined to the Folk Art Center. While the construction of the Center at Hemphill Knob could result in a reduction in casual visitors at the Folk Art Center, it is not expected that this reduction in traffic would result in a significant reduction in sales at the Allanstand Craft Shop. Also, construction of the visitor center at Hemphill Knob would not interfere with the planned expansion of the Folk Art Center. The expansion of the Folk Art Center would allow the Southern Highland Craft Guild to expand its interpretive program on mountain crafts. Information regarding the Folk Art Center and directions to the center would also be available at the Center and could encourage additional visitation to the Folk Art Center.

12. Congressman Taylor appropriated \$800,000 for the Center, but the money went to the Blue Ridge Heritage Foundation. What was that money to be used for? (one comment)

We have no record of an \$800,000 appropriation for the Center that went to the Blue Ridge Heritage Foundation.

13. Who will own the Center and who will determine what occurs in the building? (one comment)

The building would be owned by the NPS, who would also be responsible for all activities that occur in the building.

14. Congressman Taylor envisions a connection between the film to be shown in the theater and the marketing center. (one comment)
a. Will the film be about the Parkway or about Western North Carolina attractions?

The film would be about the history or culture of the Parkway.

b. Who will decide on the content of the film?

The NPS would decide on the content of the film.

c. Who will make the film?

A private sector firm would make the film, but a company has not been selected.

d. Who will pay for the film?

Funding for the film would be part of the Congressional appropriation.

15. The commenter is concerned about the marketing center proposed in the Center.
(one comment)

The Center would contain a regional information center, not a marketing center. While these are similar uses, the Center is intended to provide a service to visitors by making information available to them regarding other features and attractions in Western North Carolina and directions to these attractions. The Center is not intended to promote any particular attraction or group of attractions, as would be implied by a marketing center.

a. What are the criteria for inclusion in the marketing center?

The congressional appropriation could include conditions for inclusion in the Center.

Additional direction could be provided by Congressman Taylor.

b. Who will determine these criteria?

The NPS would determine the criteria for inclusion in the Center, as conditioned by part “a” of this comment.

c. What organization will be responsible for the marketing center?

The NPS would be responsible for the Center.

d. Is there a fee for being included in the marketing center?

There would be no fee associated with the Center.

e. Will the Center also market Virginia attractions?

The Center would not provide information on Virginia attractions.

f. The NPS policy in the past has been to locate commercial activity outside the park boundaries. Is this a change in policy?

The Center would have only the commercial activities that are described in the DCP/EA.

This would include food vending, a bookstore/gift shop, and theater.

g. Congressman Taylor stated that the marketing center would be used to take polls and surveys. How is this compatible with normal park operations?

The NPS employees and contractors occasionally conduct surveys in a park to collect information to support a particular study. Any surveys that are collected in the Center must be supported by the NPS and must help to support their mission.

16. What happens if the Blue Ridge Heritage Area loses its funding? (one comment)

The NPS would operate until a new partnership could be negotiated.

17. The visitor center at the Folk Art Center has very few staff. Who is going to staff the Center, a much larger complex? (one comment)

Although funding has not been approved, the NPS plans to staff the Center with one full time interpretive employee, two six-month seasonal interpretive employees, and three maintenance employees. Partners would provide staff for the Center, bookstore, and theater operations. Some of the employees may be transferred from the Folk Art Center, but a minimal NPS interpretive program would remain at the Folk Art Center.”

Part 2 -The following updates and editorial corrections modify the text of the DCP/EA.

Global. There are numerous references to the Parkway Headquarters building and Alternatives B and C being located at mile marker 383.

Correction: The correct location of the Parkway Headquarters building and Alternatives B and C is mile marker 384.1

Executive Summary, Page iv, Paragraph 7. “Preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage and maintain, whenever possible, an environment that supports diversity and variety of individual choice (Advantage – Alternative B and C).”

Correction: “Preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage and maintain, whenever possible, an environment that supports diversity and variety of individual choice (Advantage – Alternative E).”

Page 14, last Paragraph. “Because the facility and interpretive programs remains the same in each of the alternatives, the ongoing operational cost for the regional district visitor center would not vary. ... Annual operation cost for staffing the regional district visitor center would be \$491,500. ... Under Alternative D, the cumulative staffing requirements for both the regional district visitor center and the Folk Art Center may be reduced.”

Correction: “Because the facility and interpretive programs remains the same in each of the alternatives, the ongoing operational cost for the Center would not vary. ... Annual operation cost for staffing the Center would be \$491,500. ... Under Alternative D, the cumulative staffing requirements for both the Center and the Folk Art Center may be reduced.”

Page 17, Paragraph 2. “The 63 stalls located to the northwest of the headquarters building serve as employee parking.”

Correction: “The 59 stalls located to the northwest of the Headquarters building serve as employee parking.”

Page 18, Paragraph 1. “The design team estimated that 237 parking stalls would be required for the Hemphill Knob site (*see Appendix C.*)”

Correction: “The design team estimated that 239 parking stalls would be available at the Hemphill Knob site, including 180 new visitor spaces and 59 overflow spaces from the Headquarters’ employee parking lot (*see Appendix C.*)”

Page 19, Paragraph 3. “It contains the immersive digital theatre that will dramatically portray some features associated with the Parkway.”

Correction: “It contains the immersive digital theatre that would dramatically portray some features associated with the Parkway.”

Page 20, Paragraph 1. “This alternative would also call for 237 parking stalls, similar to the number for Alternative B.”

Correction: “This alternative would also call for 239 parking stalls (180 visitor spaces and 59 overflow spaces), similar to the number for Alternative B.”

Page 33, Paragraph 2. “*Preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage and maintain, whenever possible, an environment that supports diversity and variety of individual choice ...* at the site for expanded parking. Advantage – Alternative B and C.”

Correction: “*Preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage and maintain, whenever possible, an environment that supports diversity and variety of individual choice ...* at the site for expanded parking. Advantage – Alternative E.”

Page 34, Paragraph 2. “As Alternative B has the advantage in four of the six criteria, Alternative B, the preferred alternative, is also the environmentally preferred alternative.”

Correction: “As Alternative B has the advantage in three of the six criteria, Alternative B, the preferred alternative, is also the environmentally preferred alternative.”

Page 52, Paragraph 1. “Sixty parking spaces for headquarter employees are located between the headquarters building and the other structure.”

Correction: “Fifty-nine parking spaces for Headquarter employees are located between the Headquarters building and the other structure.”

Page 57, Paragraph 2. “Groundbreaking for the Interpretive Center occurred in the fall of 2003 and is planned for completion in the spring of 2005.”

Correction: “Groundbreaking for the Interpretive Center occurred in the fall of 2003 and the center opened in the summer of 2005.”

Page 57, Paragraph 4. “Phase I of the improvement is scheduled for completion in spring of 2005.”

Correction: “Phase I of the improvement is scheduled for completion in June 2006.”

Page 58, after Paragraph 4. – Add this paragraph. “The Grove Arcade Arts and Heritage Gallery in downtown Asheville is planning to construct a visitor kiosk. The kiosk will contain a 50 square foot interactive map of Western North Carolina that points out the features and attractions in the area. There will also be four monitors that provide documentaries on the

Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, the crafts of Western North Carolina, the music of Western North Carolina, and the Cherokee Indians. The kiosk will be open to the public in mid-October 2005.”

Note- The Grove Arcade Arts and Heritage visitor kiosk would be added to each Cumulative Effects discussion in the Affected Environment, Evaluation Methodology, and Environmental Consequences section of the DCP/EA. There would be negligible cumulative effects to the resources described in the DCP/EA associated with this action.

Page 62, Paragraph 3. “Alternative B would not produce major effects on air quality whose conservation is ... Consequently, there would be no impairment of air quality as a result of implementation of Alternative B.”

Correction: “Alternative C would not produce major effects on air quality whose conservation is ... Consequently, there would be no impairment of air quality as a result of implementation of Alternative C.”

Page 76, Paragraph 1. “...cowbird (*Molothrus ater*)...chipping sparrow (*Spizella passerine*)...”

Correction: “...cowbird (*Molothrus ater*)...chipping sparrow (*Spizella passerine*)...”

Page 91, Paragraph 6. “About 150 feet south of the Headquarters driveway...”

Correction: “About 261 feet south of the Headquarters driveway...”

Page 129, Paragraph 2. “It is estimated that 5 of the full time personnel would be NPS staff and the remainder would be non-government employees. The 5 NPS staff would be current interpretive employees who would be transferred to the regional destination center from the Folk Art Center and no new NPS employees would be required. The NPS interpretive activities at the Folk Art Center would be discontinued and that activity would shift to the regional destination visitor center.”

Correction: “The NPS would employ one full time and two six-month seasonal interpretive employees and three maintenance employees. The remainder would be non-government employees. Some of the employees may be transferred from the Folk Art Center, but a minimal NPS interpretive program would remain at the Folk Art Center.”

Page 130, Paragraph 2. “It is estimated that 5 of the full time personnel would be National Park Service staff and the remainder would be non-government employees. The 5 National Park Service staff would be current interpretive employees who would be transferred to the regional destination center from the Folk Art Center and no new National Park Service employees would be required. The National Park Service interpretive activities at the Folk Art Center would be discontinued and that activity would shift to the regional destination visitor center.”

Correction: “The NPS would employ one full time and two six-month seasonal interpretive employees and three maintenance employees. The remainder would be non-government employees. Some of the employees may be transferred from the

Folk Art Center, but a minimal NPS interpretive program would remain at the Folk Art Center.”

Page 134, Paragraph 1. “The headquarters building at Hemphill Knob has 63 parking spaces for employees and 28 auto/light truck spaces for visitors.”

Correction: “The Headquarters building at Hemphill Knob has 59 parking spaces for employees and 28 auto/light truck spaces for visitors.”

Page 136, Paragraph 2. “There would be 182 auto/light truck spaces... On those weekends when demand exceeds the available parking spaces in the visitor parking lot, there are 60 Headquarters employee parking spaces available for overflow.”

Correction: “There would be 180 auto/light truck spaces... On those weekends when demand exceeds the available parking spaces in the visitor parking lot, there are 59 Headquarters employee parking spaces available for overflow.”

Page 138, Paragraph 2. “There would be 182 auto/light truck spaces... On those weekends when demand exceeds the available parking spaces in the visitor parking lot, there are 60 Headquarters employee parking spaces available for overflow.”

Correction: “There would be 180 auto/light truck spaces... On those weekends when demand exceeds the available parking spaces in the visitor parking lot, there are 59 Headquarters employee parking spaces available for overflow.”

Page 138, Paragraph 5. “The construction of Alternative D would result in minor, short term, local, indirect, adverse effects to the transportation system near Hemphill Knob.”

Correction: “The construction of Alternative D would result in minor, short term, local, indirect, adverse effects to the transportation system near the Folk Art Center.”

Page 139, Paragraph 2. “The operation of Alternative D would result in minor to moderate, long term, local, indirect, adverse effects to the transportation system near Hemphill Knob.”

Correction: “The operation of Alternative D would result in minor to moderate, long term, local, indirect, adverse effects to the transportation system near the Folk Art Center.”

Page 140, Paragraph 5. “The construction of Alternative D would result in minor, short term, local, indirect, adverse effects to the transportation system near Hemphill Knob.”

Correction: “The construction of Alternative D would result in minor, short term, local, indirect, adverse effects to the transportation system near the Folk Art Center.”

Page 141, Paragraph 2. “The operation of Alternative D would result in minor to moderate, long term, local, indirect, adverse effects to the transportation system near Hemphill Knob.”

Correction: “The operation of Alternative D would result in minor to moderate, long term, local, indirect, adverse effects to the transportation system near the Folk Art Center.”

Page 142, Paragraph 4. “The construction of Alternative D would result in minor, short term, local, indirect, adverse effects to the transportation system near Hemphill Knob. The operation of Alternative D would result in minor to moderate, long term, local, indirect, adverse effects to the transportation system near Hemphill Knob.”

Correction: “The construction of Alternative D would result in minor, short term, local, indirect, adverse effects to the transportation system near the Folk Art Center. The operation of Alternative D would result in minor to moderate, long term, local, indirect, adverse effects to the transportation system near the Folk Art Center.”

Page 157, Paragraph 6. “Blue Ridge Parkway – Free Vacation Map and Guide.”...

Correction: “2003 Blue Ridge Parkway – “Free Vacation Map and Guide.” ...