



# **Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument**

## **General Management Plan**

### ***Civic Engagement Comment Analysis Report***

**September 2021**

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## INTRODUCTION

The National Park Service (NPS) has begun the process of developing a General Management Plan (GMP) at the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument (national monument). As a new park unit, the national monument must develop a comprehensive GMP, which identifies long-term goals for the park and guides management of the visitor experience, park facilities, and operations at the park.

The park released a newsletter for the GMP on June 7, 2021. The newsletter provided the public with background on the project, an update on activities at the park, and a timeline for the planning process. The newsletter also solicited comments from the public on five questions pertaining to visitor use and experience at the national monument as well as any other feedback they would like to provide. The newsletter was published on the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website at: <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/BICRGMP>.

There were two public meetings for this project: on June 16, 2021, from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. CT, which had 14 attendees, and June 17, 2021, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m., which had 27 attendees. The Zoom Q&A function and chat, as well as interactive polling software (PollEverywhere.com), were used for discussions with the public in an interactive format.

Any comments entered into PEPC by the public, e-mails sent to park staff, and comments received live during the public meetings were considered and included in the overall project record. This *Civic Engagement Comment Analysis Report* provides a summary of the comments expressed during the public comment period from both online submittals and the public meetings; PEPC was open through July 7, 2021.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

**Correspondence:** A correspondence is the entire document received from a commenter and includes letters, e-mails, discussion from the public meetings, comments entered directly into the PEPC database, and any other written comments provided either at the public meetings or in person at the park.

**Comment:** A comment is a portion of text within a correspondence that addresses a single subject such as a discussion on the amenities commenters would like to see at the A.G. Gaston Motel. The comment could also question the accuracy of the information provided in the newsletter or at the public meeting, question the adequacy of any background information, or present issues other than those presented in the newsletter and public meetings.

**Concern Statements:** Concern statements summarize the issues identified by the individual comments. Similar comments were grouped into a single concern statement to summarize the thoughts of multiple commenters into a single summary statement.

## COMMENT ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

Comment analysis is a process used to compile and correlate similar comments into a usable format for decision makers and the project interdisciplinary planning team. Comment analysis assists NPS in organizing, clarifying, and addressing information pursuant to National Environmental Policy Act regulations. It also aids in identifying the topics and issues to be evaluated and considered throughout the planning process. For this process, correspondences were first entered into the comment database for comment management. Individual comments in the correspondence were identified and summarized

under each of the individual questions posed to the public. These summaries were then compiled in a comment summary report.

The NPS PEPC database was used to manage the comments. The database stores the full text of all correspondence and allows each comment to be categorized by topic and issue. The database tallies the total number of correspondences and comments received, can sort and report comments by a particular topic or issue, and provides demographic information on the sources of each comment. All comments were read and analyzed, including those of a technical nature, opinions, suggestions, and comments of a personal or philosophical nature. Although the analysis process attempts to capture the full range of public concerns, this report should be used with caution. *Comments from people who chose to respond do not necessarily represent the sentiments of the entire public.*

## CONTENT ANALYSIS TABLES

The following tables were produced by the NPS PEPC database and provide information about the numbers and types of correspondence received, organized by code and various demographics. Data on the number of correspondences received by correspondence type, organization type, state, and country are presented.

Also included below is a table detailing the number of comments identified by code. Approximately 114 individual comments were derived from the 11 correspondences received on the newsletter for the plan. A transcript from each of the public meetings is included as a correspondence in PEPC, along with a PollEverywhere report (interactive polling software), and the Q&A text received in the Zoom platform during the June 17, 2021, meeting.

**Correspondence Distribution by Correspondence Type**

Correspondence Type	Correspondences
Web Form	5
E-Mail	1
Transcript	2

**Correspondence Distribution by Organization Type**

Organization Type	Correspondences
Unaffiliated Individual	7

\*While official representatives did attend the public meetings, the transcripts are categorized as “unaffiliated individual” due to the multiple views represented within.

**Correspondence Distribution by State**

State	Correspondences
Alabama	5
North Carolina	1
Unknown	1

**Correspondence Distribution by Country**

Country	Correspondences
USA	7

For this project, comments were organized by topic questions that were posed to the public during the comment period. Topic questions entered in PEPC include the following:

- 1) Where would you prefer to start your visit to the national monument and why? Three alternative locations are being considered:
  - A.G. Gaston Motel;
  - Birmingham Civil Rights Institute;
  - Proposed annex to the 16th Street Baptist Church;
  - Other
- 2) What changes need to occur in the downtown area to improve access to the site and the experience of visitors?
- 3) How would you like to experience the national monument if you only had one day? What if you had multiple days?
- 4) What would be your preferred way to experience the resources of the national monument if given an option between:
  - An entirely self-guided tour to all sites;
  - An NPS ranger-led tour that provides interpretation of all sites;
  - Representative of each site that provides interpretation of the specific story at each location; or
  - Other?
- 5) How would you prefer to access more distant locations in the city related to the civil rights story? Would you like to be able to park your car at each site or park once and take a shuttle/trolley?
- 6) Given space limitations, rank the types of interpretive and educational experience you would prefer to be provided at the restored A.G. Gaston Motel:
  - Historically accurate recreation of what the site looked like in the spring of 1963, when the significant historic events were taking place;
  - Flexible outdoor space for gatherings or special events;
  - Changing exhibits that feature a range of topics related to the history of the site;
  - Permanent exhibits specifically related to the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham, including oral histories of those involved in the events of 1963.
- 7) In one or two words, what is your vision for the future of the overall monument?

During the public meetings, attendees were also asked to participate in live polling activities for a subset of these questions. The results of the live polling in the public meetings are shown after the comment summaries, where applicable. Due to low meeting attendance, these polls were only conducted during the second meeting, conducted on June 17, 2021.

## SUMMARY OF COMMENTS

### **Question 1: Where would you prefer to start your visit to the national monument and why? Three alternative locations are being considered:**

- **A.G. Gaston Motel;**
- **Birmingham Civil Rights Institute;**
- **Proposed annex to the 16th Street Baptist Church;**
- **Other**

**CONCERN STATEMENT:** Commenters noted that they would prefer to start their visit to the national monument at the following places:

- A.G. Gaston Motel

- Birmingham Civil Rights Institute
- Proposed annex to the 16th Street Baptist Church
- 16th Street
- The Information Center/Foot Soldier Headquarters

Commenters who suggested starting at the A.G. Gaston Motel noted that it is the center of the monument and a key location to the historic events. It was also suggested that, if the motel is the starting point, interpretation between the sites could happen chronologically. At a minimum, starting at the Gaston Motel as the “hub” with clear direction and connection to the other sites (“spokes”) was a common suggestion from commenters.

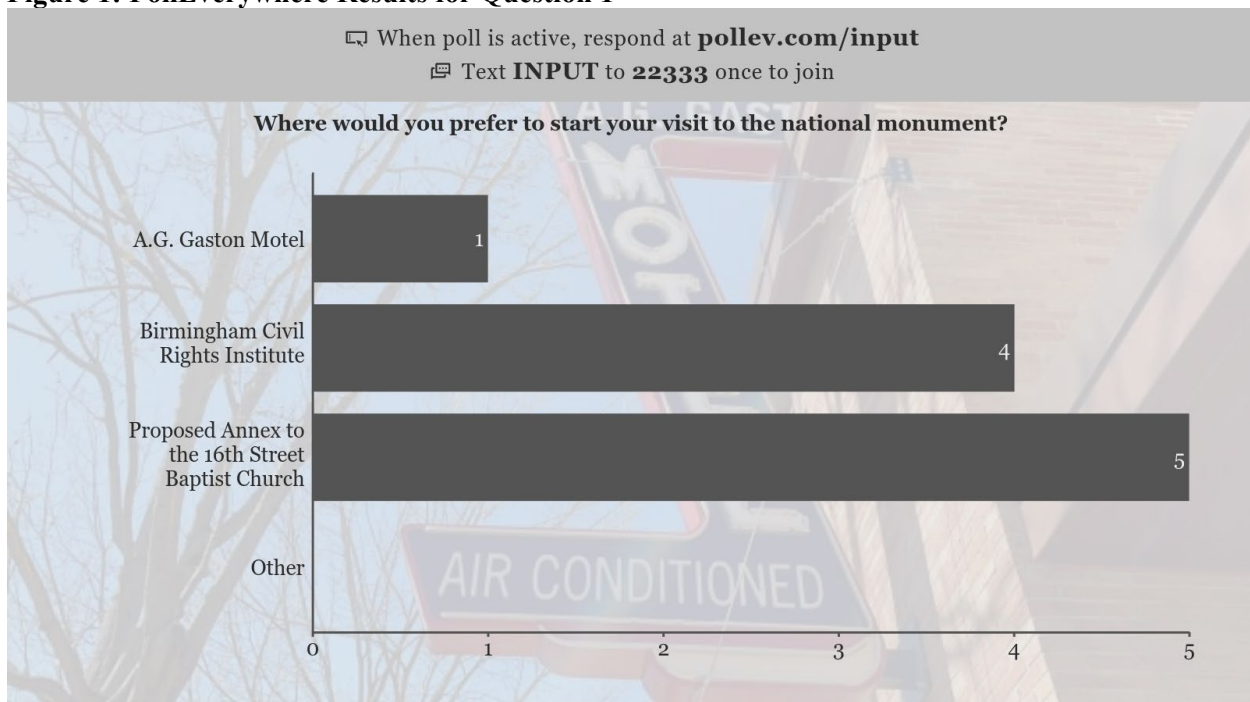
Commenters who suggested the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute noted that the institute provides a broad setting for interpretation and can orient visitors to the background and importance of each site. Commenters noted that a shuttle service would likely need to be provided out to Bethel Baptist Church because it is somewhat farther away.

Commenters who suggested the proposed annex to the 16th Street Baptist Church, or a new building altogether, noted it would not interfere with the historical context of the existing buildings or the pilgrimage aspect of interpretation. It would also have the potential to fill vacant space in the area and provide vibrancy in the immediate vicinity of the national monument.

Other commenters noted that the Information Center/Foot Soldier Headquarters would be a starting location due to the centralized location.

Figure 1 shows the results of live polling on this question.

**Figure 1: PollEverywhere Results for Question 1**



**Question 2: What changes need to occur in the downtown area to improve access to the site and the experience of visitors?**

**CONCERN STATEMENT:** Commenters stated that, to improve access to the site and the experience of visitors, the downtown area needs to have access to amenities, the adjacent lots/properties need to be cleaned up, sidewalks need to be repaired, construction projects need to be completed, and there need to be clean and easily accessible public restrooms. One commenter noted that converting the one-way streets to two-way streets as recommended in the 2004 City Master Plan, with the concomitant Complete Streets and streetscaping, would improve access to the site and the experience of visitors. Another commenter suggested a large mural or banner on the brick wall across the street from the Kelly Ingram Park that connects to the site. Other suggestions include putting historic cars in the parking lot of the Gaston Motel, signage that shows what the neighborhood would have historically looked like, wayfinding signage, and providing a map to visitors for wayfinding.

**Question 3: How would you like to experience the national monument if you only had one day? What if you had multiple days?**

**CONCERN STATEMENT:** Commenters noted that, if they only had one day to visit the monument, they would prefer to visit the A.G. Gaston Motel, 16th Street Baptist Church, and the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Commenters noted that, in a single day, a guided tour between the main sites would be preferred. One commenter noted that a single, one-day experience could focus on the 1963 Birmingham Campaign and the work done by individuals within the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights and Southern Christian Leadership Campaign to plan, organize, motivate, and strategize during that spring.

Commenters noted that, in a multi-day visit, NPS could lay down more context for Birmingham during reconstruction (including its role as an industrial project), on convict-leasing and lynching, and the enforcement of segregation laws. Commenters also noted that, during multi-day visits, visitors could hear from locals who lived the civil rights history. Other suggested sites to be included in interpretation include Dynamite Hill, City Hall, the Library, Greyhound Station, Civil Rights walking trail to Smithfield and Dynamite Hill, Enon Ridge, Arlington, Red Mountain Park and Ruffner Nature Preserve, Oak Hill Cemetery, East Lake Park, and Bessemer. One commenter noted that multiple days would require staying off site because there are not many hotels or restaurants in the immediate vicinity, which may discourage this type of visit.

**Question 4: What would be your preferred way to experience the resources of the national monument if given an option between:**

- **An entirely self-guided tour to all sites;**
- **An NPS ranger-led tour that provides interpretation of all sites;**
- **Representative of each site that provides interpretation of the specific story at each location; or**
- **Other?**

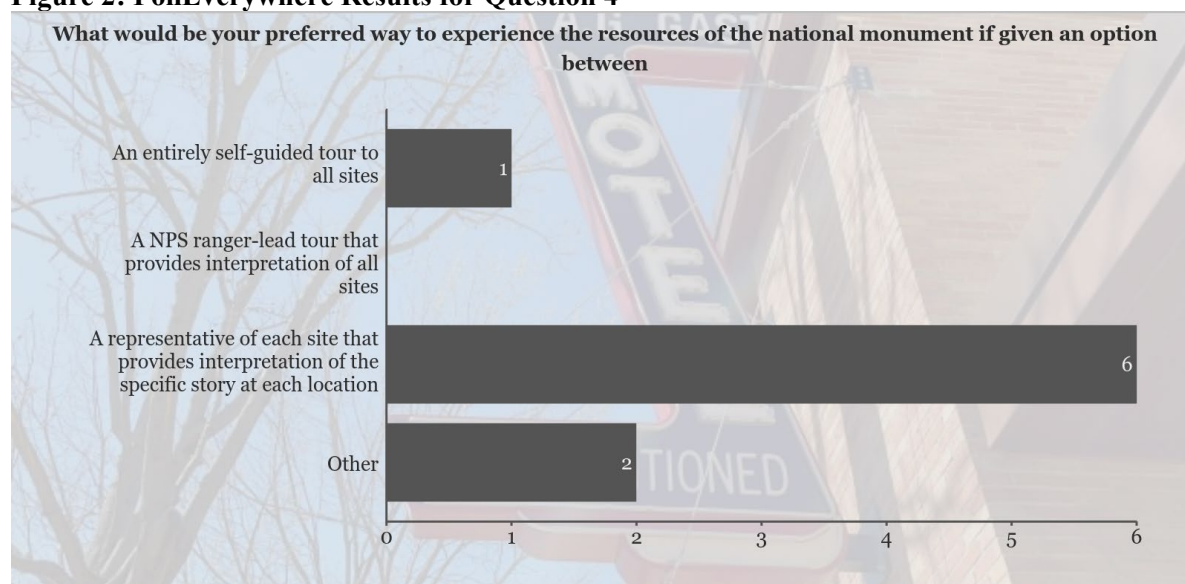
**CONCERN STATEMENT:** Commenters stated that all three options (an entirely self-guided tour to all sites, an NPS ranger-led tour that provides interpretation of all sites, and a representative of each site that provides interpretation of the specific story at each location) would be acceptable ways to experience the national monument. Commenters suggested that a phone-based application could also be used to assist with self-guided walking tours.

Commenters were supportive of having individuals interpret stories at each site and noted the value of having representatives educate the public. Commenters did note concern that some of the partner sites may not be able to provide interpretation; that it would be a big lift in coordination; and the messaging would need to be consistent throughout the sites, while still providing unique and specific stories. Commenters also supported oral histories being shared at each site by engaging community members, including those who were affected by the historic events directly, their family members, and community members. One commenter noted that there are various ways to provide interpretation in a meaningful way, such as through song, film, primary source documents, and talking.

Commenters were supportive of the option for walking tours and suggested using rangers, trained docents, and community youth engagement programs. Commenters were supportive of various lengths of tours and suggested both deeper dives and shorter walking tours. One commenter noted that, because of time constraints, it would be difficult to visit all sites in one day.

Figure 2 shows the results of live polling on this question.

**Figure 2: PollEverywhere Results for Question 4**



**Question 5: How would you prefer to access more distant locations in the city related to the civil rights story? Would you like to be able to park your car at each site or park once and take a shuttle/trolley?**

**CONCERN STATEMENT:** Commenters noted that they would prefer to access more distant locations in the city by parking in the vicinity of the main locations of the national monument and then have a shuttle or trolley to the more distant locations. One commenter suggested improving walking trails and signage to nearby sites that are within walking distance. One commenter stated that they would prefer no construction of new parking areas at other sites, unless Bethel Baptist would like to have a shared lot, and instead suggested parking lots farther away.



**Question 6: In one or two words, what is your vision for the future of the overall monument?**

**CONCERN STATEMENT:** During the public meeting, attendees expressed that the following words described their vision for the future of the overall monument:

- Education
- Engaging
- Connectivity
- Preservation
- Partnership
- Sustainable
- Worldwide
- Place to Experience Historic Civil Rights in America
- Learning
- Pilgrimage

Figure 3 shows the results of live polling on this question.

**Figure 3: PollEverywhere Results for Question 6**



**Question 7: Given space limitations, rank the types of interpretive and educational experience you would prefer to be provided at the restored A.G. Gaston Motel:**

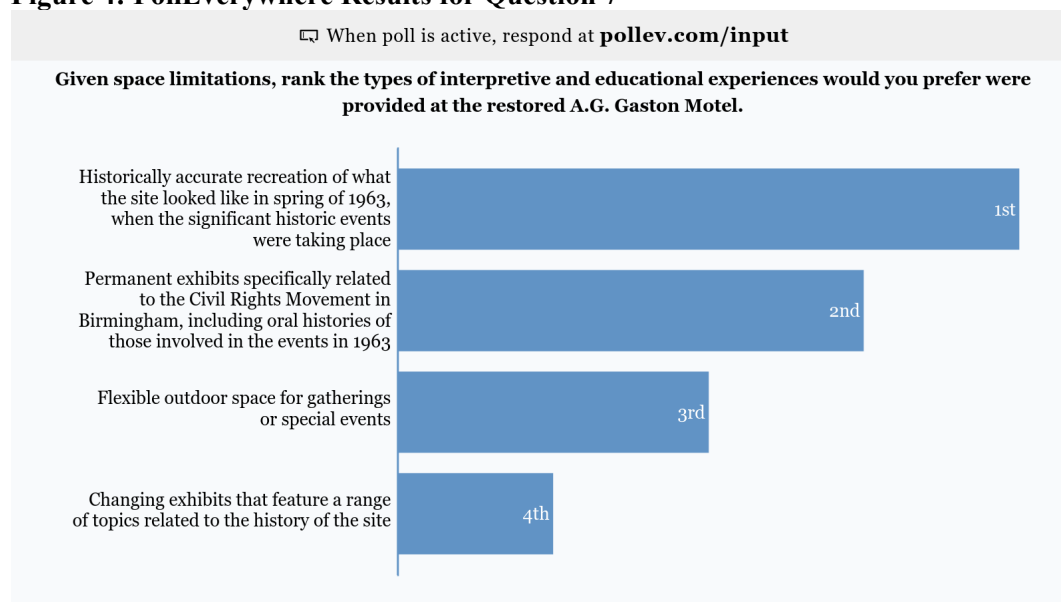
- **Historically accurate recreation of what the site looked like in the spring of 1963, when the significant historic events were taking place;**
- **Flexible outdoor space for gatherings or special events;**
- **Changing exhibits that feature a range of topics related to the history of the site;**
- **Permanent exhibits specifically related to the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham, including oral histories of those involved in the events of 1963.**

**CONCERN STATEMENT:** Commenters stated that all four interpretive and educational experiences are important at the A.G. Gaston Motel. Specifically, commenters expressed that they would like to include the following features:

- Information about those civil rights leaders and foot soldiers who lived in Birmingham (e.g., Fred Shuttlesworth)
- A permanent exhibit for A.G. Gaston
- Dialogue about how the black middle class thrived as economic beneficiaries of segregation
- Historic cars, music from the time, news conference clips, live entertainment, food, menu similar to the original restaurant, phone booths, etc.
- Begin the tour of the A.G. Gaston Motel with a tour guide followed by a Q&A session
- Include modern functionality in the restaurant (e.g., charging ports for cell phones)
- Include connectivity between the A.G. Gaston Motel and the radio tower
- Ensure the space includes air conditioning
- A functioning nightclub
- Rental space

Figure 4 shows the results of live polling on this question.

**Figure 4: PollEverywhere Results for Question 7**



## **Other Comments:**

Commenters provided comments in addition to the questions provided. A summary of these comments is provided below.

**CONCERN STATEMENT:** One commenter asked if each site could have their own stamps.

**CONCERN STATEMENT:** One commenter asked if NPS has authority to establish signage in the district.

**CONCERN STATEMENT:** Commenters expressed concern about accessibility. One commenter noted that having all of the interpretation for the A.G. Gaston Motel on the 2nd floor could provide accessibility issues for mobility-challenged visitors. One commenter asked if NPS will support assuring restroom facilities are compliant with accessibility standards in other properties within the national monument. Another commenter asked if the elevator is historic and if it is currently suitable for visitation use. One commenter noted that elevation changes may make it difficult for some guests to experience the site.

**CONCERN STATEMENT:** Commenters stated that the streetscaping is limited to a very restrictive area of blocks, that Bethel Baptist feels very separated, can there be consideration of linking between other sites.

**CONCERN STATEMENT:** Commenters stated that many of the partner sites and structures within the district of historical significance are not included and should be, such as:

- Eddie Kendrick Park
- Linn Park
- Birmingham Public Library
- City Hall
- Greyhound Station
- Civil Rights Trail
- Park High School
- Fourth Avenue Business District
- The corner of 17th and 7th, Poole Funeral Home

**CONCERN STATEMENT:** One commenter asked if there will be fees charged to enter the park and noted that it can be exclusionary to people in the area. One commenter supported sites benefiting monetarily.

**CONCERN STATEMENT:** Commenters asked if the City of Birmingham has a historic district ordinance. Commenters noted that, if there is a historic ordinance, it could impact how alterations to the buildings occur. One commenter asked if there has been a cultural resources survey or assessment of cultural fabric.

**CONCERN STATEMENT:** One commenter requested that NPS restore the radio station building across the street from the A.G. Gaston Motel with a replica of the old radio station sign/marquee.

**CONCERN STATEMENT:** One commenter requested commissioning of a movie script that encompasses the sites and sights, particularly the motel, the bombing for motivation, the park for demonstrating for justice, etc.

**CONCERN STATEMENT:** One commenter stated that a benefit to having an NPS-managed national monument is that there is an opportunity to invite people to identify with the heroes of the story, such as Fred Shuttlesworth, which could help toward mending prolonged divisions in the community.