



United States Department of the Interior




NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Southeast Regional Office
Atlanta Federal Center
1924 Building
100 Alabama St., SW.
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

IN REPLY REFER TO:
SER-PC

NOV 20 2008

Memorandum

To: Superintendent, Great Smoky Mountains National Park

From: Regional Director, Southeast Region 

Subject: Finding of No Significant Impact on the Environmental Assessment,
Oconaluftee Visitor Center, Great Smoky Mountains National Park

The attached Finding of No Significant Impact is approved.

Attachment

TAKE PRIDE
IN AMERICA 

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
FOR
OCONALUFTEE VISITOR CENTER
-ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT-**


GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK
Gatlinburg, Tennessee

The Preferred Alternative does not constitute an action that normally requires preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in accordance with the regulations issued by the Council on Environmental Quality. The Preferred Alternative will not have a significant effect on the human environment. Environmental impacts that could occur are negligible or minor 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 will 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: 
Dale A. Ditmanson
Superintendent, Great Smoky Mountains National Park

10/22/08
Date

Approved: 
David Vela
Regional Director, National Park Service, Southeast Region

11-17-08
Date

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
OCONALUFTEE VISITOR CENTER
-ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT-**

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK
Gatlinburg, Tennessee

BACKGROUND

Great Smoky Mountains National Park proposed to improve inadequate visitor service facilities at the Oconaluftee Visitor Center, Swain County, North Carolina. The proposed facility would provide new space for: restrooms, museum displays, information, sales area, storage and vending area. Improved Parking and vehicular circulation would help support the new facilities.

The current Oconaluftee Visitor Center, located near Cherokee, NC, was built in the winter of 1940-1941. This structure was constructed in the Colonial Revival/National Park Service (NPS) rustic style by a combination of Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and contract labor. The structure was historically used for a Federal Magistrates Court, Ranger Station, and maintenance facility. In 1949, the building was converted by the Park for use as a visitor center.

The current services provided to the visitor by the Park staff include: information, orientation, interpretation, and visitor services. Park interpretive staff provides both formal and informal interpretive programs to the visiting public within the main room of the visitor center, the front porch, and the adjacent Mountain Farm Museum. A variety of exhibits are displayed on the walls of the main room of the visitor center.

Approximately 1,600 to 2,100 visitors use the visitor center each day during the peak travel months of May to October (350,000 visitors a year). In addition to interpretation and orientation, the current space contains a small book store operated by the Great Smoky Mountains Association.

The primary limitation to providing better visitor services at the Oconaluftee Visitor Center is the lack of space. According to the NPS Planning Model (a computer program based on large public gathering spaces), the current Oconaluftee Visitor Center's 1,100 square footage is well below what would be the prescribed based on the center's visitation. This model projects that more than 8,000 square feet is needed to adequately service the visiting community. This lack of space places limitations on the services provided and impacts the Park's ability to appropriately convey important Park cultural and natural resource stories to the visitor.

Parking and vehicle flow through the parking areas is currently awkward. The existing parking lot is located on the western side of the building. The lots have several entry and exit points to the parking areas making movement through the lot hazardous.

Southeast of the existing building lays the Mountain Farm Museum. The nine structures compromising the museum include: a residence, barn, meat house, chicken house, apple house, corn crib, combination gear shed and corn crib, blacksmith shop, and springhouse. The structures were moved from various areas of the Park to their present location during the 1950s when the Park was making numerous historic structures more accessible to Park visitors. Only the barn was originally located in Oconaluftee, although it was moved from its original location.

This document records the decision to implement an alternative from the Environmental Assessment (EA) through a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) pursuant to the Council on Environmental Quality's regulations (40 CFR 1500 and 42 USC 4332(2)(c)) for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

Under the Build Alternative (Alternative B), the existing building (c. 1941) currently used for the visitor center would be utilized as a multi-purpose space (public meetings, seminars, Parks as Classrooms) and employee offices. A new visitor center, comfort station and information kiosk would be built. This Alternative would be implemented in two phases. The first phase would be the reconfiguration of the south parking lot, entrance, exit drives and the repaving of the north parking lot. The second phase work would be the construction of the new visitor services buildings. Access to the second phase would be facilitated by installation of a temporary drive so as not to disturb the work done in Phase 1 and still permit access to the existing visitor facilities.

Phase 1 -Vehicle Access and Parking

The proposed parking lot will be reconfigured to provide more efficient parking for autos and increased parking for busses/recreational vehicles, as well as simplifying traffic movement. In order to accommodate the proposed parking configuration, Newfound Gap road will be realigned with the addition of turning and acceleration lanes. These actions are being engineered as part of the rehabilitation of Newfound Gap Road by the Federal Highway Administration (1B19, Phase II) and have been assessed within that compliance process. The southern parking lot would be reconfigured and the entrance would be shifted south of its current location to allow space for the proposed visitor center, as well as avoiding the existing wetland.

Phase II - Structures

Three new structures would be built to improve visitor services: a visitor center, restroom building and information kiosk. All structures would be located in an area south east of the existing visitor center building. The proposed visitor center building would be large enough to accommodate current visitation and to properly tell the Park's natural and cultural history stories to the Park visitor. The building would be approximately 7,000 to 8,000 square feet in size. The proposed restroom and vending building would be located separately from the visitor center.

The size of this building will be approximately 1,000 to 1,300 square feet. The vending portion of the structure will be set away from the restrooms but within the same structure.

The proposed information kiosk would stand alone, within close proximity to the visitor center and the restroom building. The approximate size of the building will be 200 to 400 square feet. It would contain maps, a backcountry permit station and orientation/information for visitors who come to the area when the proposed visitor center is closed.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative (Alternative A), there would be no changes made to the existing buildings, pedestrian pathways, parking, vehicle circulation and restrooms. The manner in which the Park tells the cultural and natural histories of the area to the visitor would remain unchanged. The No Action alternative is presented as a requirement of the National Environmental Policy Act, (NEPA) and is the baseline condition with which proposed activities are compared.

Alternatives Considered but Rejected

Between the years of 1986 and 1990, the National Park Service (NPS) wrote a Development Concept Plan/ Environment Assessment (DCP/EA) for a new visitor center in the Oconaluftee area of the Park. At that time, the DCP/EA explored two alternatives for constructing a new visitor center. Concept A was to expand the existing visitor center. Concept B was to construct a new visitor center at the Park boundary with Cherokee. The concepts from the 1990 DCP/EA were removed from further consideration due to high costs, visitor needs and environmental impacts. Construction of the current project would be done completely with donated funds for a smaller building that still fulfills the needs of the visitor. The alteration of the Newfound Gap Road provided an opportunity to realign the visitor center parking lot, allowing additional flexibility in the placement of structures thereby removing environmental concerns as compared to that of the 1990 proposal.

ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

As defined by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ): “The environmentally Preferred Alternative is the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in NEPA’s Section 101. Ordinarily, this means the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative which best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources” (CEQ 2005a).

The environmentally Preferred Alternative is the alternative that best:

1. Fulfills the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations
2. Ensures for all Americans safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings
3. Attains the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk of health or safety, or other undesirable and unintended consequences
4. Preserves important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage and maintains, wherever possible, an environment that supports diversity and variety of individual choice
5. Achieves a balance between population and resource use that will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities
6. Enhances the quality of renewable resources and approaches the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources

The Environmentally Preferred Alternative is Alternative B, the Build Alternative (also the Preferred Alternative). This alternative was determined to be the Environmentally Preferred Alternative since it best meets the goals above regarding trustee responsibilities, ensuring productive surroundings, attaining uses without degradations, preserving natural resources, maintaining diversity, achieving balance use versus preservation, and enhancing the quality of the resources. This is achieved through the new visitor center providing adequate visitor services that would better educate the public on cultural and natural resources needing protection. The education benefits would not be limited to just the Park but also the surrounding region and the southeast United States. Alternative B is also located in an area that had been previously disturbed. With its small building foot print there will be minimal impact on cultural and natural resources.

THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE AND SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

As defined in 40 CFR §1508.27 from the CEQ's regulations that implement the provisions of NEPA, significance is determined by examining the following criteria:

Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.

The construction of a new visitor center, restrooms and information kiosk would benefit the Park visitor, as well as benefiting the Park's cultural and natural resources. The beneficial impacts would be to the: museum collection, historic structures, terrestrial and aquatic wildlife resources and natural resources. With the new visitor center, there would be the proper space to display artifacts of the museum to educate visitors on the cultural history of the Park. The existing visitor center would remain and have less uses placed upon it, thus preserving its historic interior finishes. The new visitor center would serve as a conduit for visitors to the Mountain Farm museum, which is a collection of historic buildings that were located throughout the Park.

Natural resources would ultimately benefit as the visitor would be provided proper education of Park natural resources and how to enjoy them without causing harmful or disturbance.

No major impacts will occur to the Park's natural resources, terrestrial and aquatic wildlife, water resources, soils, air quality, noise, archeological resources, and cultural landscape. Soils have already been disturbed by the construction of the 1941 building and parking lot construction projects. Construction would involve grading activities that would only disturb the top layer of soil and rock. These impacts would be minimal and temporary; after construction is completed, the Park will restore the area by applying native seed mixtures, and plants to be utilized to revegetate disturbed areas. The existing vegetation that is to be removed is maintained lawn, and it will not have any major negative impact to the Park's natural resources. The removal of vegetation would be minimized to only those areas necessary to complete the proposed action and recovery should occur within one growing season. Impacts to terrestrial and aquatic wildlife would occur in just the areas of ground disturbance, causing wildlife to seek alternative course of travel.

Disturbance to any archeological resources would be mitigated against with the proper recovery and cataloging of any artifacts found during construction. The one historic feature known will be recovered prior to construction.

Noise levels will increase temporarily during construction, but will return to previous levels once construction is complete. There will be temporary, negligible impacts to air quality due to the amount of exhaust emitted by the construction equipment. There will be no long term impacts to noise levels or air quality as a result of implementing the selected alternative.

Any negative impacts caused by construction will be temporary and will not cause significant damage in the future.

No significant impacts will occur to the Park's museum collection, ethnographic resources, historic structures, meteorology, geology, or threatened/endangered species.

The degree to which the action affects public health or safety

Minor temporary impacts will occur during the construction process. The delays to traffic and parking during the construction process should be minimal and will not directly pose any impact to the health and safety of visitors. However, the construction of a reconfigured parking lot will allow traffic to flow smoothly and safely. The construction of the restroom building will provide a better walking surface allowing improved visitor access to the restrooms.

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

The NPS defines five categories of cultural resources: 1) archeological resources; 2) historic structures; 3) cultural landscapes; 4) ethnographic resources; and 5) museum collections. Each of these types of cultural resources was evaluated in this EA. Based on this evaluation, the Park finds that cultural resources will not be affected.

Wild and scenic rivers have not been designated within Great Smoky Mountains National Park boundaries; therefore, they are not impacted by this proposed project.

The Natural Resource Conservation Service (1993) defines prime farmland as soil that produces general crops such as common foods, forage, fiber, and oil seed. Unique farmland is defined as soil that produces specialty crops such as fruits, vegetables, and nuts. The visitor center will disturb 0.2 acres of prime farmland soil that has been previously disturbed. This was documented to the Natural Resources Conservation Service on December 11, 2007.

The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial

Implementation of the project will not result in controversial effects on the human environment. Only one letter commenting on the EA was received and that letter was in support of the visitor center.

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

Visitor services and learning opportunities will improve. There are no identified risks associated with the Preferred Alternative that are unique or unknown. No effects associated with the Preferred Alternative are considered highly uncertain as identified during the analysis for the EA or during the public review of the EA.

The 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 does not establish a precedent for any future actions that may have significant effects, nor does it represent decisions about future considerations.

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

Though the Preferred Alternative will be constructed shortly after the re-alignment of the Newfound Gap Road, the actions do not relate to other actions which would result in cumulative impacts.

The degree to which the action may adversely affect items listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), or other significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources

The EA was written in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). No museum objects or historic structures will be impacted by this alternative. Minor adverse impact will occur to cultural landscapes. There is a potential for minor adverse impact to one historic feature. This feature is a construction and abandonment of a manhole filled with construction debris. Based on the material found in the manhole, it is felt that it was constructed during the Park development period. The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) reviewed the project and in a letter dated June 4, 2008, has requested additional archeological information be provided to them. They have also requested that they receive a copy of the building plans, as they become available. The recovery of significant archeological information by means of controlled scientific excavation is appropriate to mitigate the adverse effects of the project on archeological sites and will conform to the *Secretary of Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation*, the *Advisory Council on Historic Preservation's Treatment of Archeological Properties; A Handbook and Recommended Approach for Consultation on Recovery of Significant Information from Archeological Sites*, and the Department of Interior, National Park Service, and *Definition of National Register Boundaries for Archeological Properties, National Register Bulletin, No. 12*. All human remains, sacred objects, objects of cultural patrimony, and/or associated funerary objects will be treated according to the statutes set forth in the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (25 U.S.C. 3002; 104 Stat 3048).

The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973

The Preferred Alternative is not anticipated to impact any threatened and endangered species. No native species will be extirpated from the Park, and no rarity ranked species of G3 or rarer will have a population lost as a result of this project. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in a letter dated May 13, 2008, stated that it has no objection to the implementation of the Preferred Alternative (B "Build Alternative").

Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment

This action violates no Federal, State, or local environmental protection laws.

IMPAIRMENT STATEMENT

In addition to reviewing the list of significance criteria, the NPS has determined that implementation of the Preferred Alternative will not constitute an impairment to the critical resources and values of the Park. This conclusion is based on a thorough analysis of the environmental impacts described in the EA, public comments, relevant scientific studies, and the professional judgment of the decision-maker guided by the direction in *NPS Management Policies 2006*. The plan under the Preferred Alternative would not result in significant adverse impacts to Park resources. Overall, the plan would result in benefits to Park resources and values, as well as opportunities for visitor enjoyment, and it would not result in their impairment.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

A public scoping document was mailed out in June 2007, announcing the project and inviting people to attend a public scoping meeting to be held on July 19, 2007. Notice of the scoping meeting was also advertised on local radio stations and posted on the NPS web site. The Public Scoping announcement was mailed out on June 29, 2007, to 190 government officials, conservation groups and residents around the Park to gather their input on the project. The public was asked to attend the public scoping meeting and to send their comments to the Superintendent, and were given a 30-day period to do so.

Public notice regarding the availability of this Environmental Assessment was distributed to municipalities, local citizens and other interested parties. In the spring of 2008, five notices announcing the availability of the EA were published in local papers. On April 21, 2008, the Knoxville-News Sentinel, The Mountain Press, and the Asheville Citizen Times printed the public notice. The public notice was also printed on April 23, 2008, in the Cherokee One Feather and on April 24, 2008, in the Smoky Mountain Times. A public comment period ran from April 21, 2008 to May 27, 2008. The EA was posted on the NPS' Planning web site at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov>. It was also available for public review at the Anna Porter Public Library, Gatlinburg, TN, and the Cherokee Qualla Public Library, Cherokee, NC, and the Oconaluftee Visitor Center, located within the Park. The public was asked to send their comments to the Superintendent, and were given a 37-day period to do so.

One comment on the EA was received during the open comment period. The comment was received by The Smoky Mountains Hiking Club. The comment stated support for the project. The FONSI will be sent to the agencies on the same distribution list as those who were sent the EA.