



You are Invited to Participate

The National Park Service (NPS), in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), is preparing an Environmental Assessment (EA) for proposed construction of Foothills Parkway Section 8D and is seeking public input beginning October 19 through November 18. This proposed new section would extend the Foothills Parkway within the existing NPS-managed corridor for 9 miles from Wears Valley to the Spur near Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. The park is conducting this public scoping in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) to determine the extent and nature of issues and alternatives that should be considered during the environmental review process.

The park obtained initial public input on the proposed Foothills Parkway Section 8D project, as well as a second project in the same area (Metcalf Bottoms Access Improvements), during a public comment period and public meeting in October 2021. This related project included a proposed connector road from Section 8D to the Metcalf Bottoms Picnic Area that has since been dismissed from consideration. Input on Section 8D received during public engagement was considered during development of preliminary alternatives for the proposed project by informing needed studies, identifying appropriate design standards for environmental conditions, and by supporting preliminary evaluation of ways to minimize potential resource impacts.

As part of the current public scoping comment period, the NPS is asking for input on the proposed action, preliminary alternatives, and issues that should be considered as part of the EA analysis. For additional information on the planning project and to provide comments please visit <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/Section8D>.





Background

The concept of a parkway in Tennessee near Great Smoky Mountains National was conceived in the 1930s. Similar to the creation of the park itself, the NPS worked closely with Tennessee officials and park supporters to develop concepts for a scenic parkway that would provide recreational opportunities for visitors, support tourism, and improve the transportation network inside and outside the park. These efforts were emblematic of the National Park Service’s growing commitment to regional recreation planning, particularly in the East.

The necessary legislation to establish the Foothills Parkway was introduced in Congress in 1940 and signed into law in 1944. It authorized the Secretary of the Interior to accept donations of land from the state of Tennessee as an addition to the park for the construction of a scenic parkway generally paralleling and connecting with the park. In 1945, the Tennessee legislature authorized acquisition of the necessary right-of-way by donation, purchase, or condemnation. Two years later, the state legislature passed another bill that authorized the state to transfer the property to the United States prior to any construction of the parkway by the federal government. The laws also provided for the reconstruction of a section of U.S. 441 between Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg, which is known as the Gatlinburg Spur. All lands comprising the 72-mile-long Foothills Parkway corridor from Interstate 40 to Chilhowee, including the Spur, have been conveyed to the United States and are part of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Park managers have reinitiated planning efforts for Section 8D now that Sections 8E and 8F are complete. The NPS completed an EA and issued a Finding of No Significant Impact for the Wears Valley Mountain Bike Trail System within the 8D corridor in May 2022. This EA included construction of the first mile of Foothills Parkway Section 8D to provide access to the proposed mountain bike trails. The current scoping period formally initiates the NEPA process for the remaining 9 miles of Section 8D.

Purpose and Need for Taking Action

The purpose of the proposed action is to construct Section 8D of the Foothills Parkway within the existing NPS-managed corridor. The action is needed to provide recreational opportunities, support tourism, improve the transportation network inside and outside the park, and fulfill the intent of federal and state legislation authorizing construction of the Foothills Parkway.

Foothills Parkway Timeline

- 1944**
Congressional Authorization
- 1968**
Foothills Parkway Master Plan
- 1980s / 1990s**
Section 8D Design & Planning
- 1994**
Draft EIS
- 2002**
Foothills Parkway Analysis Report
- 2017**
Completion of the Missing Link (Section 8E)
- 2018**
Sections 8E and 8F Paved
- 2021**
Pre-NEPA for Current Effort

Foothills Parkway Construction History

Construction of the Foothills Parkway began in the early 1950s with the Gatlinburg Spur. Completed portions of Foothills Parkway now include the Spur and four other sections at either end of the 72-mile corridor. The western sections (8G, 8F, and 8E) extend 33 continuous miles from Chilhowee to Wears Valley and the eastern section (8A) extends 6 miles from Cosby to Interstate 40. Construction on the three middle sections (8B, 8C, and 8D) has not begun. The completed sections of the Foothill Parkway provide breathtaking views and recreational driving and bicycling experiences for more than 400,000 vehicles per year. The western sections of Foothills Parkway rank among the most popular bicycling routes on the Tennessee side of the park.

Most recently, 16 miles of the Foothills Parkway from Walland to Wears Valley (Sections F and E) opened to the public in November 2018. Construction of these sections started in 1966, but construction paused in 1989 to address steep terrain and geological conditions along a 1.6-mile segment of Section 8E (known as the “missing link”). Construction resumed after redesigning this segment to include a series of nine bridges and completing an EA. The NPS and FHWA also initiated planning efforts for Sections 8D and 8B in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Following publication of a Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Section 8D in 1994, the NPS paused the environmental planning and compliance process for all future Foothills Parkway sections until Section 8E was completed.

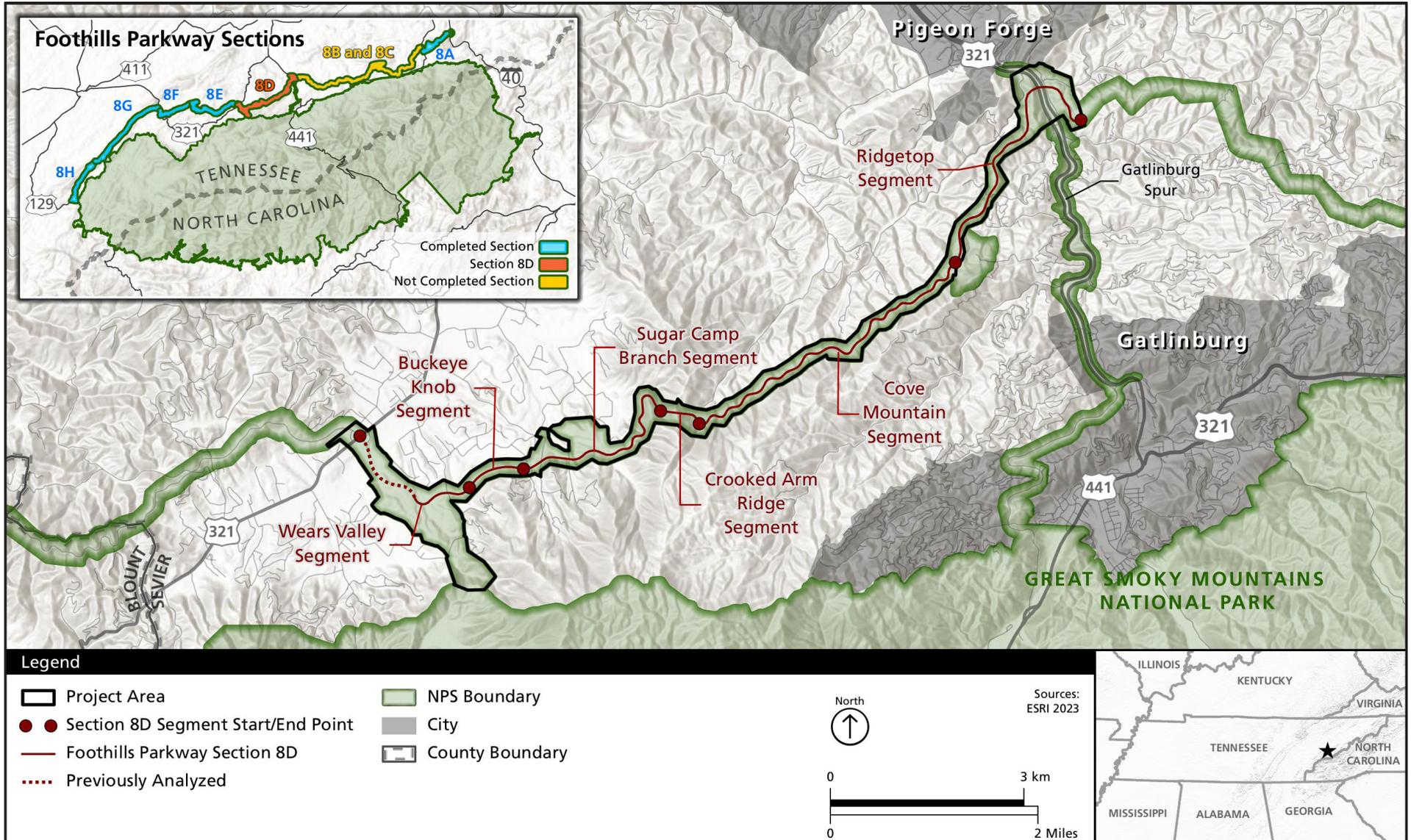


Figure 1 | Project Area Map



Preliminary Alternatives

Conceptual Design

NPS and FHWA originally completed baseline studies and preliminary designs for Section 8D between the late 1980s and early 1990s. This information was used to define the proposed action and alternatives analyzed in the 1994 Draft EIS. Conceptual designs developed in 2021 and 2022 were based on the 1994 design efforts.

Currently, the preliminary conceptual design for Section 8D includes:

- Approximately 9 miles of new Parkway within the NPS-managed corridor, which ranges from 500 to 1,000 feet wide.
- A two-lane roadway, approximately 24 feet wide with up to 3-foot shoulders, and a posted speed limit of 30 miles per hour, with areas of higher speed limits where appropriate.
- An approximately 1,200-foot tunnel through Crooked Arm Ridge.
- A bridge over the Spur and West Prong Little Pigeon River with an interchange between Section 8D and the Spur.
- Pull-offs and parking areas to offer opportunities for visitors to see the vistas and specific cultural or natural features as well as make unplanned emergency stops.

Due to land ownership, topographic and resource constraints, there is only one preliminary alternative for the main roadway alignment, however there are multiple preliminary options for the bridge over the Spur and the Spur interchange.

Spur Bridge Options

The NPS is considering three bridge design options where Section 8D crosses over the Spur and West Prong Little Pigeon River in the vicinity of Gum Stand Road and King Branch Road. All three options would connect to the Spur and local roadways using the same general interchange configuration; however, bridge height, alignment, geometry, and required slope cuts would vary for each bridge option. The general location of all three options is provided in figure 2.

- **Low Bridge Option** - The Low Bridge Option would extend across the Spur, just south of Caney Creek Road, approximately 2,900 feet north of the existing bridge at Gum Stand Road and King Branch Road. The bridge would sit approximately 30 feet above the Spur.
- **High-Curvilinear Option** - The High-Curvilinear Bridge Option would extend across the Spur, south of Caney Creek Road, approximately 1,800 feet north of the existing bridge at Gum Stand Road and King Branch Road. The bridge would sit approximately 135 feet above the Spur.
- **High-Linear Option** - The High-Linear Bridge Option would extend across the Spur, south of Caney Creek Road, approximately 1,600 feet north of the existing bridge at Gum Stand Road and King Branch Road. The bridge would sit approximately 150 feet above the Spur.

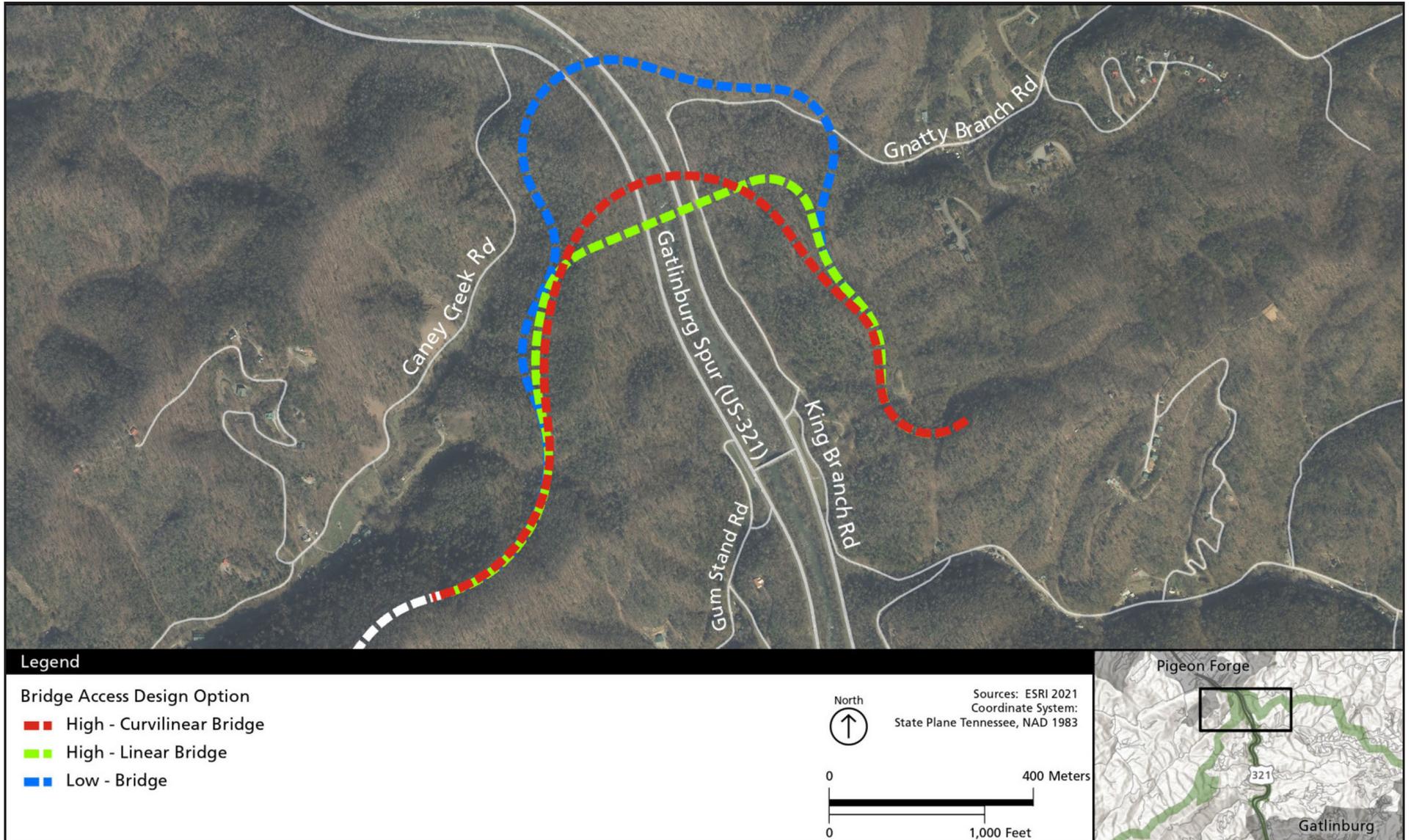


Figure 2 | Spur Bridge Options



Spur Interchange Access Options

The NPS is considering two interchange access options at the Spur to minimize impacts to the flow of traffic and adverse effects on natural resources. To maintain the flow of traffic between the Parkway and the Spur, the three bridge design options would connect through an interchange bridge over the Spur with supporting loops and ramps. The general layout and circulation patterns for both options are provided in figure 3.

- **Option 1** - Under Interchange Access Option 1, only traffic entering or exiting Section 8D would use the interchange. The interchange bridge would be approximately 400 feet north of the existing Gum Stand Road bridge. The construction of the interchange bridge would require the existing access point between the Spur and Gnatty Branch Road to be shifted approximately 1,500 feet north; however, the access points for King Branch Road would remain with some modifications. The new access point would also serve as the access point for the northbound Spur exit and entrance ramps, which would require an intersection between these ramps, Gnatty Branch Road, and the road connecting to the interchange bridge.
- **Option 2** - Under Interchange Access Option 2, all traffic entering or exiting Section 8D, including local traffic, would use the proposed interchange access. The proposed interchange bridge would be approximately 250 feet north of the existing Gum Stand bridge, and Gum Stand bridge would be removed. The construction of the interchange bridge would require the existing access point between the Spur and Gnatty Branch Road to be shifted approximately 1,200 feet north. The northern access point to King Branch Road would be removed, and all turning movements would occur at the existing southern access point.



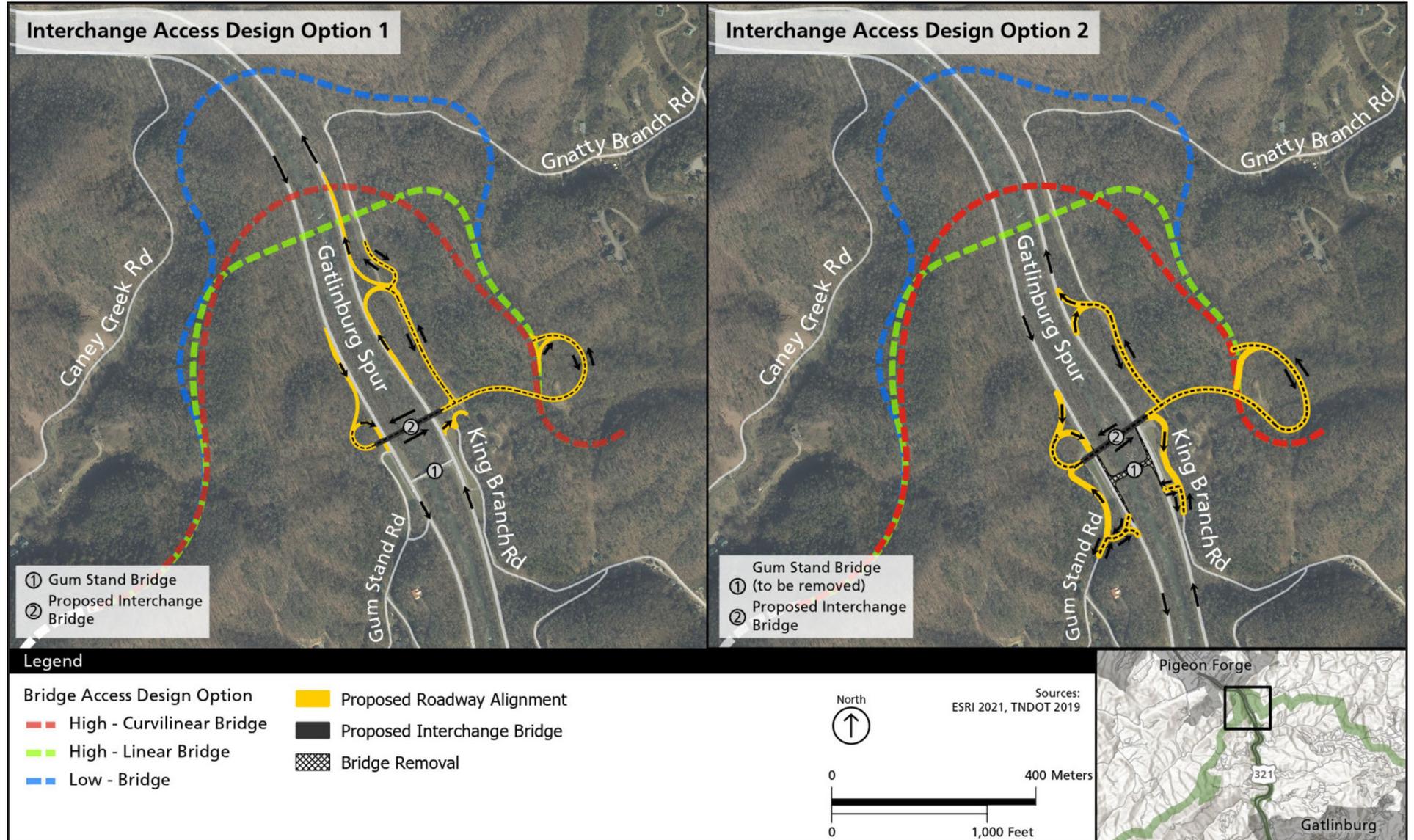


Figure 3 | Spur Interchange Access Options



Resource Considerations

In accordance with NEPA, the environmental impact analysis for Section 8D will focus on important issues identified during this scoping period. Identifying issues for detailed analysis is a central part of scoping. Following civic engagement in October 2021, the NPS completed several technical studies related to water resources, karst features, wildlife, vegetation, special status species, cultural resources, traffic, soundscapes, viewsheds, and socioeconomics to inform the development of NEPA and NHPA compliance documents. The NPS interdisciplinary team has identified preliminary issues for analysis based on the recent studies, past studies, and comments received during civic engagement. As part of scoping, the NPS is requesting public input on the preliminary issues identified, as well as other important issues that warrant analysis and sources of data that should be considered.

- **Geologic Features and Processes** - Detailed geotechnical investigations of the proposed alignment would be completed to inform design of Section 8D. Primary geologic considerations include slope stability; the potential presence of unweathered pyrite, which can produce acidic drainage when exposed to air and water; and the presence of karst topography, which is characterized by dissolving bedrock and features such as sinkholes, losing (sinking) streams, caves, and springs.
- **Vegetation** - Parkway construction would require forest clearing and ground disturbance.
- **Wildlife** - Vegetation clearing would result in habitat alteration, loss, and fragmentation.
- **Special Status Species-Bats** - The Section 8D corridor contains suitable summer roosting and foraging habitat for bats, including the federally endangered northern long-eared bat (*Myotis septentrionalis*) and the tricolored bat (*Perimyotis subflavus*), which is proposed for listing as endangered. A known winter cave for the tricolored bat also exists within the corridor.
- **Water Resources** - Vegetation clearing and ground disturbance on steep slopes during construction and creation of new paved surfaces would increase stormwater runoff. Streams, springs, and groundwater, including residential wells and a cave stream could be affected.
- **Historic Resources** - The Gatlinburg Spur is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Properties listed in the NRHP or potentially eligible for listing are also located in Wears Valley. In accordance with section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, the NPS will consult with the Tennessee State Historic Preservation Office to consider potential effects of the proposed action on historic resources.
- **Visual Resources** - Portions of Section 8D could be visible from Wears Valley and other areas outside the park.
- **Visitor Use and Experience (Motor Vehicle Congestion)** - Section 8D would connect to the Gatlinburg Spur. Opening of Section 8D has the potential to influence visitor use and local traffic patterns.

Schedule

This public scoping period represents the second opportunity for you to be involved in the planning process. The comment period will be open through November 18, 2023. Once the NPS has reviewed all public and agency comments on the preliminary range of alternatives, the Park will prepare the EA. There will be one additional opportunity for public comment when the EA is released.

October/November 2023	Public scoping period (we are here)
November/December 2023	Review public scoping comments and finalize the alternatives
January/February 2024	Prepare EA
February/March 2024	Release EA for public review / public comment period
Late Spring 2024	NPS decision



How to Comment

Through November 18, there are a variety of ways you can submit comments:



Submit electronically (preferred method):
<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/Section8D>



Submit written comments by mail to:
Great Smoky Mountains National Park
Foothills Parkway Section 8D Scoping
107 Park Headquarters Road
Gatlinburg, TN 37738

