

Natchez Trace Parkway

Tennessee River Bridge Replacement

Public Release of the Environmental Assessment

National Park Service
US Department of the Interior



Your involvement is requested!

The National Park Service (NPS), in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration, is announcing the release of the environmental assessment (EA) for the John Coffee Memorial Bridge (Tennessee River Bridge) Replacement project. The project is located along the Natchez Trace Parkway (Parkway), which spans across the Tennessee River, approximately six miles north of Cherokee, Alabama.

In April 2024, the NPS issued a newsletter notifying interested individuals and organizations of project updates that had occurred since the civic engagement period in October-November 2022. The newsletter included information on the two action alternatives carried forward for detailed analysis and the no-action alternative. The newsletter also provided updates on the findings from the resource studies conducted to better understand the extent of potential impacts to those resources.

The NPS has prepared an EA in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to assess the environmental impacts of the proposed alternatives and to provide the decision-making framework. This newsletter provides a brief introduction and overview of the EA, as well as information on how to participate in the public meeting, and how to provide comments during the public review period. The NPS encourages you to participate in the public review period by reviewing the EA, attending the public meeting, and providing your feedback to the planning team. Information regarding the date, time, and location of the public meeting is provided on page 8 of this newsletter.

You can provide comments on our NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/natr>. Comments will be accepted for 45 days after publication of the EA, until January 6, 2025. We look forward to hearing from you!

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Background

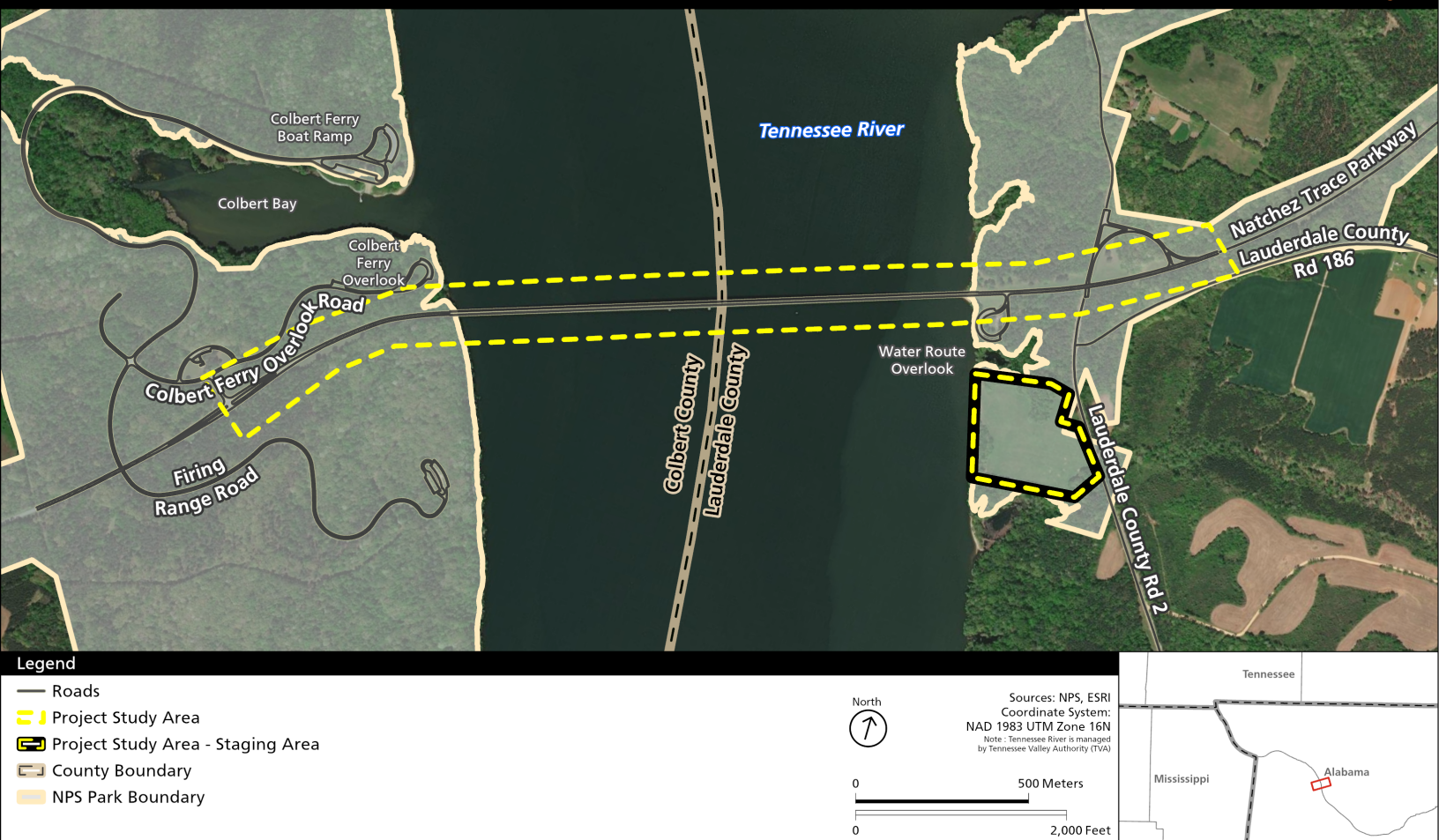
As one of the oldest transportation routes in North America, the Old Natchez Trace dates back approximately 10,000 years before present when it consisted of a network of trails. For centuries, Native Americans traveled and traded along this corridor, which crosses the homelands of Native American Tribes such as the Natchez, Chickasaw, and Choctaw. People from these Tribes and their ancestors created vibrant cultures that thrived for thousands of years along what is now the Parkway.

Native Americans were the first to establish the Natchez Trace, ushering in an era of trade and travel through this region for centuries. When the United States began to expand westward in the late 1700s and early 1800s, numerous travelers traversed the area, which became known as the Old Natchez Trace. In 1800, President John Adams designated the Old Natchez Trace as a national postal road for mail delivery between Nashville

and Natchez. However, over time, new roads and population centers were developed, and steamships began to carry people and supplies upstream. While historical uses of the Old Natchez Trace declined, the route continues to be used in various forms to the present day. Segments of the Old Natchez Trace have been incorporated into the county road system in numerous locations.

The Parkway was established as a unit of the national park system by an act of Congress on May 18, 1938, to commemorate and preserve the Old Natchez Trace as an overland route connecting Nashville, Tennessee, and Natchez, Mississippi. Today, the Parkway is 444 miles long and is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. As a designated an All-American Road (1996), the Parkway is an important treasure for modern travelers to experience historic and scenic landscapes.

Figure 1. Project Area Map



Purpose and Need

The Tennessee River Bridge opened to traffic in 1964. Prior to the bridge opening, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) issued a permit to the NPS, pursuant of Section 26a of the TVA Act, allowing the construction, maintenance, and operation of the bridge over the Tennessee River. While the TVA manages the river, the NPS manages the Tennessee River Bridge and the land on both sides of the river. The bridge provides access and connections for Parkway visitors and local communities across Alabama. The nearly 1-mile-long bridge passes over a navigable portion of the Tennessee River, allowing barge traffic underneath the bridge. Figure 1 presents the project area.

The purpose of the project is to maintain a safe and reliable bridge crossing for users over the Tennessee River, while minimizing adverse effects on Parkway resources. The project is needed because this bridge, which opened in 1964, has exceeded its 50-year design life. The bridge has not undergone a major

rehabilitation since 1964, but repairs have kept it operational and safe. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) regularly inspects the bridge in accordance with structural engineering guidelines and standards to confirm that it is safe for travel.

The bridge lacks redundancy in its design, making it a Non-Redundant Steel Tension Member Bridge, formerly known as a fracture critical bridge. Detailed structural inspections and studies note that the bridge exhibits widespread cracking in the bridge deck and notable deterioration of the bridge piers. In approximately 10 to 20 years, as the bridge deteriorates beyond the ability of routine maintenance and repairs to address structural issues and ultimately no longer meets bridge safety requirements, the NPS and FHWA would be required to close the bridge to vehicular traffic. To avoid the impacts of long-term or permanent bridge closure, the bridge needs to be replaced to provide a structurally sound vehicular bridge crossing the Tennessee River.



Alternatives

The EA evaluates three alternatives, including a no-action alternative and two action alternatives (Alternatives 1 and 2). The action alternatives present a reasonable and feasible approach that meets the purpose of and need for action. Under both action alternatives, the bridge would be approximately 43-foot wide with a typical cross section containing approximately one 11-foot travel lane in each direction and 6-foot-wide shoulders on each side. During the construction activities under both action alternatives, detour routes would be established during times of bridge closure. The detour would be approximately 42 miles each way, or approximately 1-hour of additional driving travel time each way.

Additional information about the alternatives is summarized below and shown in Figures 2 and 3. Readers can also find more detailed information on the alternatives in chapter 2 of the EA.



No-Action Alternative

The no-action alternative would continue present management operations and conditions. While the no-action alternative does not meet the purpose for and need of the project, it provides a basis for comparing the management direction and environmental consequences of the action alternatives.

Under the no-action alternative, no major changes or structural improvements to the Tennessee River Bridge would occur. The current alignment would remain unchanged, and periodic maintenance and repairs to maintain the approach roadway would continue. Issues related to the aging and eventual deterioration of the bridge would not be addressed. The NPS would continue to complete short-term and periodic repairs for the continued operation of the bridge.

Alternative 1: Replace Bridge on a Skewed Alignment Partially South of the Existing Bridge (Preferred Alternative)

Under Alternative 1, the NPS would replace the Tennessee River Bridge to improve the safety conditions for motorists, pedestrians, and cyclists in the project area. As shown in Figure 2, a new, longer bridge would be constructed on a skewed alignment, with the western side of the bridge remaining on the existing alignment and the eastern end of the bridge partially skewed to the south. The new bridge would be approximately 4,970 feet long and would shift the bridge centerline on the eastern end. Construction activities for Alternative 1 are anticipated to occur over a period of approximately 5 years (or up to 1,360 working days), with a bridge closure and detour lasting approximately 2 years.

Alternative 2: Replace Bridge on New Alignment South of the Existing Bridge

Under Alternative 2, the NPS would replace the Tennessee River Bridge to improve the safety conditions for motorists, pedestrians, and cyclists in the project area. As shown in Figure 3, a new, shorter bridge would be constructed immediately south of and parallel to the existing bridge. The new bridge would be approximately 4,945 feet long and would shift the bridge by approximately 50 feet to the south of the current alignment. Construction activities for Alternative 2 are anticipated to occur over a period of approximately 6 years (or up to 1,600 working days), with a bridge closure and detour lasting approximately 6 months.

Figure 2. Alternative 1

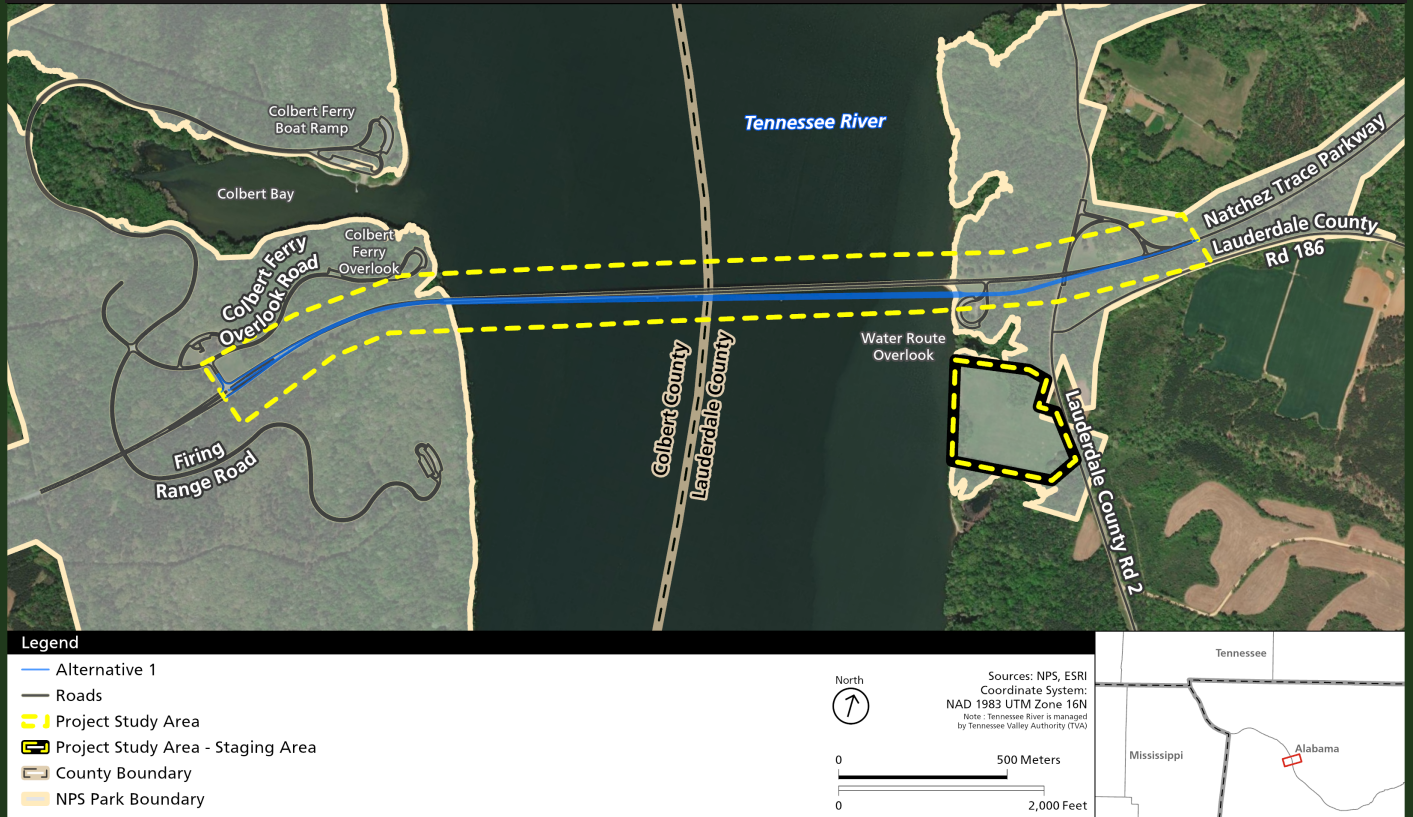
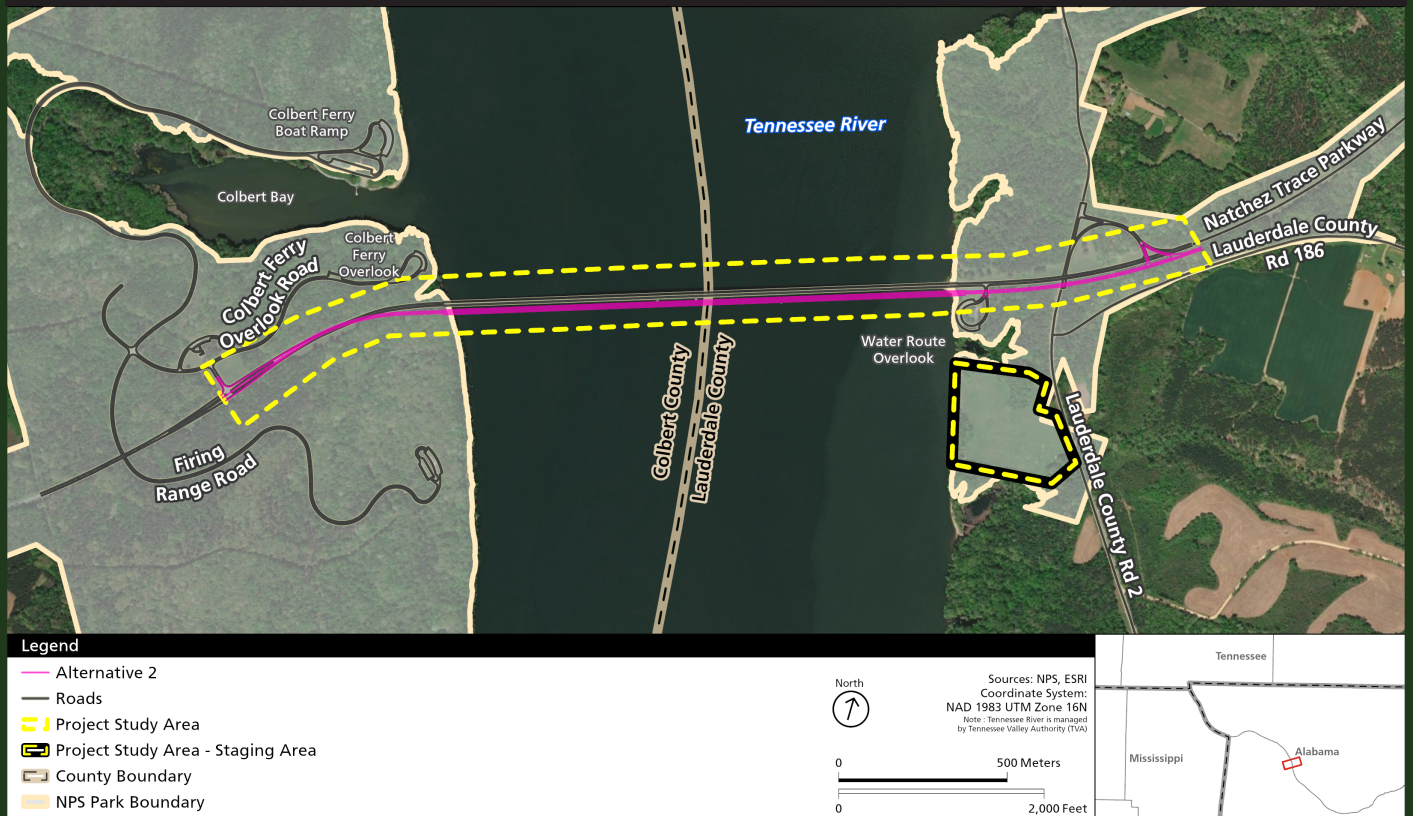


Figure 3. Alternative 2



Environmental Issues

In accordance with NEPA, “issues” or “environmental issues” can be problems, concerns, conflicts, obstacles, or benefits that result from implementation of the alternatives, including the no-action alternative. NPS conducted several studies to analyze known resources in the project area and to better understand the extent of potential environmental issues. Based on internal agency discussions and feedback from Tribal Nations, partner agencies, and the general public, the EA focuses on the following issues and potential impacts:



Photo Credit: Marc Muench



Cultural Resources – The project area includes a 2-mile segment of the 444-mile Parkway, which was determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) in 2004. The project area is within the John Coffee Memorial Bridge Cultural Landscape, which was determined eligible for listing in the NRHP in 2023 and is within the Chikasha Aiasha Traditional Cultural Landscape (TCL), also determined eligible for listing in the NRHP in 2023. The project area encompasses and is adjacent to several terrestrial and submerged archeological sites that have been proposed as the George Colbert Archeological District, eligible for designation in the NRHP under Criterion D in 2024. The Natchez Trace Parkway is also a national scenic byway and a cultural landscape. The NPS is currently working with FHWA to develop design alternatives that would avoid or minimize impacts to the known cultural resources in the project area. In addition, the NPS is continuing to consult with the Alabama State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and other consulting parties through the NHPA Section 106 process.



Environmental Justice – Environmental justice populations (also known as communities with environmental justice concerns) are present in communities adjacent to the project area. Communities with environmental justice concerns typically include populations or communities that are disproportionately impacted by the effects of climate change, environmental hazards, and other environmental injustices. These populations are at a higher risk of experiencing adverse outcomes and most often include those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, people of color, children, elderly individuals, and individuals with chronic health conditions. Under both action

alternatives, the existing bridge would be closed for a period of time while bridge construction occurs. Therefore, construction activities would impact travel operations, especially due to the distance of the proposed detour route. During the closure, communities with environmental justice concerns would need to use the detour route to reach community resources, businesses, employment destinations, emergency services, or other services in adjacent communities on either side of the Tennessee River.



Geological Resources – Detailed geotechnical investigations of the proposed alignment have been completed to inform the final design of the bridge replacement. Known karst features and bedrock systems are present in the project area. Construction activities under both action alternatives could alter local topography and the Parkway’s geological landforms; however, impacts would be mitigated. Overall impacts to soils, geology, and karst features under both action alternatives would not create any perceptible changes in these resources, and their functioning would remain unchanged over the long term.



Natural Soundscapes – A detailed Soundscape Study Report was completed, which assessed the existing ambient soundscape and analyzed future impacts for both action alternatives. Under both action alternatives, increased noise levels and other disturbances during construction could result in localized disturbances to aquatic and terrestrial species, as well as visitors of the Parkway. However, long-term soundscape impacts to aquatic and terrestrial species, and the visitor experience, are not anticipated.



Threatened and Endangered Species – Several federally listed, proposed, and candidate species are present in the project area. While the project area provides suitable habitat for federally listed and state-protected or ranked species, including bats and freshwater mussels, it does not contain critical habitat for any federally listed species. Under both action alternatives, bridge demolition and construction would have negative impacts on individual wildlife, including noise and visual disturbances and habitat loss or alteration from tree clearing and in-water work. Resource protection measures would be implemented to avoid or minimize negative impacts on species under both action alternatives.



Visitor Use and Experience – The Tennessee River Bridge serves communities, commuters, and recreational users of the Parkway. The bridge provides access to recreational resources and amenities (i.e., biking and walking trails) and historic sites. Construction activities under both action alternatives would disrupt visitor use and experience of the Parkway, access to adjacent recreational resources, and influence

traffic patterns. However, under both action alternatives, there would be long-term, beneficial impacts on visitor use and experience after construction is complete. These benefits include improving visitor safety and access to recreational and cultural resources along the Parkway.



Water Resources and Water Quality – Several water features are present in the project area, including the Tennessee River and ephemeral channels. Under both action alternatives, bridge removal and construction would impact water resources, including water features, water quality, and floodplains in the project area. Potential impacts would include erosion that leads to sedimentation and turbidity, removal of floodplain vegetation, altered water flow, and disturbance to the riverbed as a result of clearing, grading, excavation, use of heavy construction equipment, and in-water work. However, under both action alternatives, long-term impacts to water quality and water features are not anticipated; and floodplains would be allowed to revegetate after construction is complete.



The Planning Process And Next Steps

Next steps in the NEPA planning process are outlined below:

Fall 2024 (Nov. 20, 2024 – Jan. 6, 2025)	*WE ARE HERE* Release EA for Public Review and 45-day Public Comment Period
December 3, 2024	In-Person Public Meeting
Winter 2024/ Winter 2025	Analyze Public Comments and Prepare Public Comment Analysis Report
Early Spring 2025	Final NPS Decision Released
Note: This schedule is subject to change	

WE WANT YOUR
FEEDBACK

How to Comment

The public comment period is a 45-day comment period beginning November 20, 2024, until January 6, 2025. Please submit all comments no later than January 6, 2025.



By mail:
National Park Service
Natchez Trace Parkway
2680 Natchez Trace Parkway
Tupelo, MS 38804



Submit comments electronically at:
<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/natr>



In person meeting:
Cherokee Senior Center
1249 2nd Street,
Cherokee, AL 35616
December 3, 2024, from 5:00 – 7:00 p.m.

NOTE: Comments will not be accepted by fax, e-mail, or any other way than those specified in this newsletter. Bulk comments in any format (hard copy or electronic) submitted on behalf of others will not be accepted. Before including your address, phone number, email address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment—including your personal identifying information—may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.