

**CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER NATIONAL RECREATION AREA  
ORRS FERRY SITE MANAGEMENT PLAN**

**CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY REPORT**

**JULY 2025**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

From April 16, 2025, through May 16, 2025, the National Park Service (NPS) invited the public to provide input as part of a civic engagement process for the development of the Orrs Ferry Site Management Plan (“the plan”) for Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area (“the park”).

To introduce the planning effort, the National Park Service held an open house public meeting to discuss the development of the site management plan and answer questions about the project. The public meeting was held on Thursday, April 24 at 4:00 p.m. (EST). In addition to the meeting, the National Park Service developed a StoryMap and recorded a video titled “Introduction to the Site Management Plan” to provide background information on the project. Both resources were posted to the project homepage. The public was invited to submit comments on the site management plan on the project website at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/OrrsFerrySiteManagementPlan>.

At the close of this comment period, the Park Service received 25 correspondences on the project website. The project StoryMap logged more than 1,140 page visits. Of the 25 correspondences submitted, 96% came from Georgia residents and one correspondence came from a resident of Utah. Overall, most commenters were supportive of the overall vision and direction for the plan, including the desired conditions and the proposed facility improvements.

This report provides an overview of the planning process and a summary of public comments grouped into thematic topics to ensure a complete and thorough analysis.

## **PLANNING PROCESS**

The planning process began in the summer of 2024. Preliminary design elements were identified by the team during a site visit and follow-up analyses. The purpose and need for the plan were developed, as were the desired conditions for the site.

The next step is for the NPS planning team to prepare a Site Management Plan and conduct associated environmental compliance. The Site Management Plan will undergo another round of public review and comment before being finalized. The National Park Service will announce this public comment period by media release on the project website at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/OrrsFerrySiteManagementPlan> and via other sources.

Throughout the planning process, the Park Service has sought and will continue to engage with partners and the public to gather input on the project. The NPS planning team is grateful to those who engaged in the most recent public comment process and appreciate the robust and thoughtful input. This input is key to developing a plan that best serves the park’s resources, managers, stakeholders, and community members.

## **COMMENTS BY TOPIC QUESTIONS**

Comments are organized by the four questions asked to the public, as follows:

1. What do you think of the plan's purpose and need? Are there any other issues we should address in the plan? Are there any opportunities we should be sure to take advantage of?
2. What features of the Orrs Ferry unit do you value most? What activities or experiences are most important to you when visiting Orrs Ferry? How could these be enhanced?

3. What facilities do you feel are essential for a visit to Orrs Ferry? What improvements could make Orrs Ferry more accessible?
4. What are your thoughts on the proposed vision and strategies for Orrs Ferry? What other management practices or strategies should we consider?

**1. What do you think of the plan's purpose and need? Are there any other issues we should address in the plan? Are there any opportunities we should be sure to take advantage of?**

Commenters shared overall support for the plan, describing how the plan will improve access, trails, and connectivity with the greater regional networks. They noted that NPS management would help enhance the natural beauty of the area and protect the Chattahoochee River. Commenters believe that the plan will help establish the presence of the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area (CRNRA) at the northern end of the park. One commenter recommended updating the need to include “thoughtful connectivity to surrounding recreational resources—including future trails in the Bowman’s Island (East) Unit and on City of Sugar Hill land.” One commenter also recommended updating the last need listed in the plan by specifically mentioning the term “visitor use management.”

Commenters recommended that Park Services install cameras and security lights to ensure visitors feel safe in the area, and they also recommended expanding the parking options on both the east and west sides. One commenter specifically expressed concern with the limited parking in the east if there are plans to attract more visitors to this side of the park. Another commenter pointed out that connecting the RiverLands trail network could confuse visitors about the type of land they’re on (federal or otherwise), highlighting an opportunity to help clarify wayfinding with clear NPS signage. One commenter recognized the opportunity to incorporate “Fishing Information Centers” where visitors can learn about the latest regulations, appropriate catch-and-release practices, and fishing history of the area. Another commenter acknowledged an opportunity to install waysides and offer programming about the culturally rich fish weirs throughout the east side of the site. One commenter suggested educating visitors on how to safely enjoy the area, noting the danger of the cold water temperatures in the spring. One commenter added that the NPS vision is aligned with that of the City of Sugar Hill and the Sugar Hill Riverlands Authority, so there may be opportunity for partnerships.

**2. What features of the Orrs Ferry unit do you value most? What activities or experiences are most important to you when visiting Orrs Ferry? How could these be enhanced?**

Commenters were supportive of dividing the unit into four areas with unique desired conditions, and they overall agreed with the desired conditions presented. Commenters placed high value in creating a welcoming environment, providing adequate locations to fish along the river, and offering opportunities to hike, kayak, tube, walk, trail run, and enjoy the fish weirs. Commenters valued the area being friendly to all users, including kids and families, and having pristine viewsheds free of developed lands. Commenters highly valued having safe access to the river year-round.

When discussing trails, commenters valued good distances for trail running, established trails (rather than social trails), trails with natural surfaces, and safe wide paths. Commenters valued trails that pass through quiet, wild areas that are free of garbage and graffiti. One commenter suggested safety barriers (i.e. along the river bank) with a natural look that allows them blends into the landscape.

Similarly, one commenter emphasized the value of natural sounds and requested planting dense native shrubs or small trees along the Hwy 20 bridge for noise abatements. They specifically noted that evergreens (such as American Holly) could be a good fit.

Commenters valued educational signs along trails and on the river to help visitors learn about and appreciate the area. One commenter suggested that interactive fishing information centers with visual representations of productive angling practices would enhance the visitor experience. Commenters also appreciated the opportunity to engage with the riparian areas and appreciate the ongoing restoration work at Crayfish Creek. One commenter expressed value in providing interpretive materials about the canyon cut by Crayfish Creek and its inspirational story of restoration.

One commenter shared that the area is historically significant as the site for an early mercantile store and post office operated by the Orr Family. The commenter noted that there is also evidence of Native American Indian presence and activity in the area.

### **3. What facilities do you feel are essential for a visit to Orrs Ferry? What improvements could make Orrs Ferry more accessible?**

Overall, commenters noted a number of facilities they found essential on both the east and west side of Orrs Ferry. These facilities included parking, signage, restrooms, water fountains, river access, viewing piers similar to that at Jones Bridge, walking trails, benches, trash disposal, and covered pavilions where large groups can gather.

More details on specific facilities are provided below:

- **Restrooms:** Commenters emphasized the importance of restrooms being not only accessible, but also equipped with diaper changing stations and a changing room to better support water-based recreation.
- **Trash disposal:** One commenter requested that trash cans only be available in restrooms and in parking lots to help encourage leave-no-trace practices.
- **Accessibility:** One commenter requested that accessibility considerations extend beyond physical mobility to also include accommodations for individuals with visual and hearing impairments. Another commenter emphasized the importance of accessible trails on both the east and west sides of the river, recommending that the east-side accessible trail extend at least to the proposed new bridge.
- **Trails:** Commenters requested a trailhead information center and a prominent NPS sign to help visitors recognize that they are on NPS land. Commenters also acknowledged the opportunity to create longer, connected trails by linking to the Sugar Hill Greenway.
- **River Access:** Commenters noted that it would be helpful if instead of water access, there were a boat launch large enough to safely accommodate a medium-sized truck (i.e. to accommodate the GA DNR trout stocking truck). Another commenter requested the water access include a gentle ramp for swimmers, tubers, and wading anglers to use. A different commenter suggested the planning team consider low-impact, passive launch steps rather than a boat ramp, fearing that a true boat ramp would cause too much traffic in the area. One

commenter also suggested a working boat ramp that could be used exclusively by law enforcement and river rescue.

- **Parking:** Commenters emphasized the importance of adequate parking, including space for buses to safely stop, drop off riders, and pick up new passengers. On the west side, one commenter requested a public bus stop. On the east side, commenters advocated for improved parking with clear signage and trail markers that directed to facilities such as restrooms and water stations. Several commenters noted that the GDOT lot has too few spaces to meet the current demand and expressed concern about the difficulty of accessing parking from the east without making multiple U-turns. Suggestions included creating additional parking on the north side of GA Hwy 20 to allow access to the Orrs Ferry Unit from the east, extending the GDOT lot to include the driveway that accesses the property, and establishing a new parking area at the proposed gathering space that could serve dual purposes.
- **Safety:** To enhance visitor safety, commenters recommended well-lit parking areas after dark and the installation of security cameras along trails, in parking lots, and near restroom facilities. Commenters believe that cameras would help deter theft from vehicles, dumping, poaching, and vandalism.

#### **4. What are your thoughts on the proposed vision and strategies for Orrs Ferry? What other management practices or strategies should we consider?**

Commenters broadly expressed support for the vision and direction for the Orrs Ferry Site Management Plan, applauding efforts to balance public access with environmental protection, historical recognition, and long-term sustainability. Commenters appreciated the opportunity to be part of the planning process and encouraged a continued collaboration with local stakeholders, especially as demand for access and recreation grows. Multiple commenters agree with the vision of the west side becoming more accessible while the east side remains more natural and less developed.

##### Access and Connectivity

Many commenters support the need for improved and diversified river access, especially for kayaking, canoeing, tubing, and fishing. Commenters support river access on the west side and would like to see boat use supported. At Crayfish Creek, commenters are optimistic that the proposed bridge will help reduce social trailing as well as erosion in the area. In addition to the bridge at Crayfish Creek, one commenter recommended installing a large steppingstone with a lean, natural trail to the closest point of Crayfish creek from the entrance of the east side where anglers and hikers already cross the creek on the social trail. One commenter requested a shorter trail from the parking lot to access to the river so that visitors are not forced to hike down a trail with a kayak.

A number of comments highlighted the importance of connectivity, especially for the City of Sugar Hill's Greenway, trails in nearby units, and other regional trails. One commenter noted that the vision mentions connecting to City of Sugar Hill trails, while the proposed actions do not reflect that intention in Tract 2 or 4. Commenters requested incorporating mountain biking and gravel bike paths (and bike parking) in this unit to connect with other nearby trails. Commenters also requested for the park to connect Tracts 2 and 4 with future Bowmans Island trails to the north. One commenter recommended connecting the trail by the river and GA-20 with the existing paved walkways under the bridge.

One commenter also recommended incorporating a walking bridge that connects the east to the west side of the river.

### Visitor Amenities and Infrastructure

Commenters recommended a number of ideas to enhance opportunities in the area including a bird sanctuary near the river, a dog park (like the Newtown Park facility), bat houses, bee hotels, bird houses, photo opportunities (such as large Adirondack chairs), a natural playground for kids, and a beach for kids to splash in the water. One commenter expressed interest in a park office or visitor center, potentially housed at the old Garner house site, which could serve multiple purposes—from public restrooms and fishing license pickup to educational programming and community gathering spaces. Some imaginative suggestions included a small riverside restaurant, market space, native garden, and interactive areas for relaxation and learning.

The commenters' primary critique is that the vision lacks the parking needed to support existing and future use, particularly on the east side. Many commenters called for expanded parking options, particularly on the east side of the river, and improvements to the existing GDOT lot, which is seen as insufficient. Ideas included new lots on the north side of GA Hwy 20, expansion of the GDOT driveway, and a dual-purpose parking and gathering space. Better signage, wayfinding, and trail maps were frequently mentioned as priorities to support safe and effective use of the park.

### Safety and Management

Commenters requested lighting, security cameras, and waste disposal stations, especially in known problem areas like Crayfish Creek, which was described as a popular gathering spot. One commenter requested collaboration with GA DOT to create a safe pedestrian walkway on the Hwy 20 bridge, allowing access to both sides of the river without requiring a vehicle. Another commenter suggested adding a traffic light to improve safety when turning onto Hwy 20 from the east side of the Orrs Ferry Unit.

Additionally, several commenters raised concerns about social trails and visitor behavior, particularly near restored or ecologically sensitive areas. To address this issue, suggestions included improved visitor education, strategic trail design, and engineered solutions such as stone steps, designated overlooks, and clear signage to limit erosion and protect riparian zones.

One commenter noted that the proposed trails in Tract 3 differ from the desired condition of directing visitors away from the river and riparian areas (i.e. proposing three scenic viewpoints). This commenter expressed concern that the proposal would lead to visitors trying to climb down the river and stream banks, which may cause future issues in resource management and visitor safety.

### Natural and Cultural Resource Stewardship

Many commenters support the plan's efforts to preserve natural habitats while expanding access. For landscaping, commenters recommended incorporating ferns, wildflowers, butterfly bushes, and sunflowers. The Huntsville Alabama Botanical Garden was mentioned for inspiration. One commenter recommended improving the pond onsite, adding water lilies and a fountain for waterflow, and selling bricks at the park entrance to help fund the project. With the river access increasing in the area, one commenter recommended incorporating active restoration efforts to protect the riverbanks. One commenter recommended including viewshed maintenance of the river overlook / scenic viewpoints to focus visitor use on those areas and prevent visitors from traveling down the steep riverbanks.

Some commenters highlighted the historical significance of the Orrs Ferry area, which was one home to a ferry crossing, a mercantile store, post office, and Native American activity. The commenters encouraged including interpretive signage or educational programming to reflect this cultural history.

### Education and Recreation

Several commenters supported the plan's commitment to expanded access, urging continued efforts to make trails and facilities ADA-accessible and welcoming for a wide range of visitors, including anglers of all ages and abilities. One commenter recommended emphasizing the water trail and its connection to the broader Riverlands project.

Commenters shared mixed opinions on additional infrastructure being added to the site like an education center, with some seeing it as a valuable opportunity for children's learning, while others suggested that minimal development ("less is more") would best preserve the area's character. One commenter noted the Gwinnett Heritage and Environmental Center as a comparable project and suggested that something like it would be great at Chattahoochee River.

### Long-Term Vision and Financial Sustainability

Commenters reflected a strong interest in planning for future capacity, recognizing that access improvements may significantly increase visitation. Several commenters suggested implementing or expanding user fees to help fund park maintenance and improvements, ensuring that increased use does not outpace stewardship.

Other commenters stressed the importance of distinguishing the National Park experience from that of city or county parks, particularly in terms of design, rules, and interpretation—especially on the more natural east side of the river.

## **MISCELLANEOUS COMMENTS**

One commenter suggested that if rezoning under the site management plan, they recommend keeping Tract 1 in the NARZ and rezoning Tract 3 as Natural, to mirror the current zoning on the east side of the river (as rezoned in the TMP).

One commenter requested that the proposed fisherman information center incorporate data from the Chattahoochee Cold Water Tailrace Fishery Foundation Inc. to help visitors understand the aquatic ecology of the river and its tributaries.

One commenter recommended that the National Park Service coordinate closely with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources to assure that the recreational public is included in planning (e.g. for trout stocking) and mentioned two additional parties interesting partnerships: the Chattahoochee River Keepers and the Atlanta Fly Fishing Club.

One commenter urged to educate visitors about the park regulations (i.e. dogs must be on leash) so everyone can have a safe and meaningful visit.

A number of questions were raised by commenters including:

- Are people allowed to camp in National Recreational Areas? This commenter suggested to make camping tent-only.

- Will Orr's Ferry in Gwinnett continue and connect with Forsyth County?
- How do you collect the user fees? This commenter stated that most visitors believe that the parking fees are the user fees, and they were concerned about the park losing out on potential revenue.