

4th Natural Bridge State Park Master Plan Committee Meeting Record
June 29, 2017; 3:00 to 5:30 PM
Natural Bridge Historic Hotel and Conference Center
15 Appledore Lane, Washington Hall
Natural Bridge, VA 24578

Purpose of Meeting – Review three alternatives for facility development at Natural Bridge State Park. Additionally, to discuss the placement a facility selection for the park in order to meet the park purpose statement.

Committee members in Attendance - Katie Conner, Lauren Stull, Arthur Bartenstein, Kurt Russ, Al Bourgeois, Susan Hammond, Jennifer Flynn, Jean Clark, Spencer Suter, Jay Scudder, Paul Cooper, Eric Wilson, Mike Pulice, Chris Wise

Committee members not in Attendance - Benjamin Cline, Ken Conger, Angela Conroy, Faye Cooper, Bonnie Cranmer, Sam Crickenberger, Creigh Deeds, Bill Gordge, Chris Green, David Hinty, Destry Jarvis, Tracy Lyons, Conrad Matiuk, John Mays, Devin McLindsay, Brenda Mead, Wayne Nicely, Bonnie Riedesal, Barbara Walsh, James Woltz, Jennifer Bell

Others present - Laurence Hammond (Roanoke Times), Matt Miller (for Del. Austin), Paul Emerson (VCLF), Paul Bryant (VCLF)

DCR staff in Attendance:

Al Cire, Lynn Crump, Samantha Lopez, Veronica Naughton, Jim Jones, Theresa Duffey, Kelly Cooper, Jennifer Wampler, Tom Smith, Nathan Younger

Meeting began at 3:05 PM

Greetings - Paul Cooper welcomed everyone on behalf of the Natural Bridge Hotel and VCLF. Jim Jones welcomed everyone and discussed new hires, work underway at the park and the formation of a Friends of Natural Bridge group.

Re-cap of previous meetings - Al Cire, District Resource Specialist, described natural resource data collection completed and underway for the resource management plan—defining buildable areas, identifying community types, etc. being used for the resource management plan. Additional natural resources fieldwork should be completed in late August to help establish desired future conditions for park resources.

Jennifer Wampler, Planning and Recreation Resources, summarized progress on the master plan to date and reviewed the park purpose statement and goals. She reviewed progress on the visitor experience plan and said a draft should be complete by September.

The minutes from the October meeting were approved.

Charrette Review - Lynn Crump, Planning and Recreation Resources, described the charette process that took place over the winter and how that work contributed to concept development for an overall vision for park. A common concept emerged from this process **to bring nature to the forefront by providing an authentic park experience with opportunities for contemplation, education and gathering supported by events, programming and interpretation to help celebrate the Bridge.** Additionally, she

stated that the plan development should offer a great impression/sense of arrival along with protection of resources (views, bridge, gorge rim, communities, etc.), a range of overnight experiences and trail connections throughout the site.

Alternatives Presentation - Lynn went through each of three alternative developed by staff incorporating ideas that emerged during the charette.

Theresa Duffey, state parks, described typical park development for overnight facilities: A full campground is 30 sites with a bathhouse, which can be doubled with a second loop with an additional bathhouse. State Parks generally provide 2 to 3 yurts or camping cabins and 20 cabins with a range of 2, 3 and 6-bedroom options. This development is always contingent on what the land can accommodate and funding appropriated by the General Assembly.

Proposed Facilities Discussed – the following list was used to define and discuss facility options. Once completed, the participants had the opportunity to multi-vote on the most important elements for the park.

- Artisan center (Tamarac or Heartwood)
- Bypass
- Cabins
- Camping
- Group camping
- Primitive camping
- Yurts with bathhouse
- Contact station
- Education center (wet labs, movie theater,
- Farm (25 acres) store equipment
- Hostel
- Parking expansion
- Performance venue (outside stage area, parking restroom, shelter)
- Picnic areas (restroom, playground)
- Picnic gathering areas J(catering kitchen)
- Small shelters
- Trail hiking, mountain biking
- Trailhead parking (restroom?)
- Training center (education)
- Viewpoints (small shelter, parking or walk-in only)
- Visitor center (park offices, interpretive displays, designed for site, set tone for park experience)

Questions & Answers - After the vote an open discussion focused on the traffic patterns, whether or not to continue having traffic on Natural Bridge, what is the role and make up of a visitor center, etc. More detailed summaries of the discussion follow.

Traffic and bridge discussion and Questions -

- Are there counters in place looking at traffic? No
- Is there a desired exit to the main entrance based on counters? Previous management directed people to enter on Exit 175 so they didn't lose business to the zoo. Most people enter off Exit 180 because main feeder markets are Richmond, DC, Northern VA.
- Would it hurt visitation rates if a bypass was provided? There is more concern regarding the stability of Natural Bridge. A full structural study of the Bridge will be a recommendation of the master plan.
- Jim Jones reported that staff take note of stones on path, photographing and sizing. Rocks present almost daily during freeze/thaw periods with less in the summer.

- Timing of structural study will depend on GA appropriation.
- Move for bypass, where is VDOT with that? Possible to work with local and regional planning to move this priority forward.
- It is NOT considered a structure by VDOT nor is it in VDOT bridge inventory. VDOT only has the right of way to use the land surface of the bridge. VDOT considers it a rock formation and thus does not require special considerations, like a man-made bridge would.
- There is a process you go through to fund transportation process. Look at safety issues, congestion, that is how projects are prioritized. Application process, scoring process based on elements of importance. Two primary considerations are safety and economic development, at 30 %. All new projects have to be competitive and serve a purpose in order to use transportation dollars. Every two years, locality or planning district makes an application.
- Studies have been done for a roundabout at the Route 11, Route 130 and entrance to the Natural Bridge parking area. Evaluation of intersection was based on close calls, accident data and traffic volume and did not justify improvements.
- Smart scale process is new to VDOT, this would come through county or planning district. DCR can pursue as part of development of park under permit.
- Historical traffic data is not applicable now that park open with visitation being up 35% since park opened. Decision not primarily based on volume—look at accident history, major changes to development, use transportation dollars appropriately to address issues that are there, not ones that may come up.
- How much of this proposed bypass is on existing ROW? Piece of ROW from Cedar Creek along Red Mill Road to Route 11 and the Interstate.

Other questions and comments -

The goal in general is to create a sense a place in how the facilities are developed, accessed, used and what materials are used. To provide an 'out in nature' experience. To reestablish the 'old resort' with beautiful grounds.

Do we want the experience of Jefferson or to have the park be only the bridge and a roadside attraction?

What is a Visitor Center and how does it differ from a contact station? The Visitor Center is the place where one gets immersed in the story of the park and where staff offices are. The Visitor Center is where the visitor experience begins. The contact station is a brief stopping off point where people get oriented to where they want to go and get their reservations. The question is where we want people to do what – learn about the park, access the bridge, pay their fees, etc.

Why was the Golf Course area chosen as a location for a visitor center? It provides a view of the James River Valley and allows for interpretation of the watershed and valley as whole. It would be a 15-20 minute walk to the Bridge along an attractive route. The Bridge is better illuminated from the west side, especially through winter, and offers another view of the park that people have not experienced

What is sequence, what is build out for the park? Master plans done in three phases, 10 years for each phase.

Proposed Facility Placement

The group voted on the placement of the facilities, with much discussion on the placement of the visitor center and whether or not to repurpose the Rockbridge Center and Wax Museum, or whether to clear this space and re-create a park like setting. Several alternative facility placements were accepted with the understanding that the final selection and location will be determined by DCR staff. Alternative 'D' was sketched up and will be presented in-house in the next month or so.

Priority for phasing of facilities

Lynn discussed that since the property is not owned by the state that it is unlikely that the General Assembly will provide funds for facility development prior to the transfer of the land to DCR. In the meantime, it is hoped that funds for necessary studies and stabilization of structures could happen prior to that. The group's multi-vote for their most desired facilities will be used to help determine future phasing along with input from park staff.

Review Timeline and Next Meeting

The next meeting is the second public meeting. The date has not been determined, but is slated for early in the fall. The advisory committee does not have to attend, but we welcome attendance to hear the public input. During the meeting staff will review the process to get to that point, the preferred alternative, and introduce the phasing for park development.

If there are no major challenges, then no additional advisory committee meetings will be held and the plan will be drawn up and presented to the Board of Conservation and Recreation (BCR). The DCR Board presentation will be held during a regularly scheduled BCR meeting. Upon approval, the master plan will be sent to the General Assembly for approval.

The meeting adjourned at 5:30 p.m.