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Building downtown could have major renovations



Renovations are planned for Vanderbilt Apartments. ANGELA WILHELM/ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

Meredith Hemphill
Special to the Citizen Times

ASHEVILLE - A venerable downtown building that for more than five decades has housed apartments for seniors is set for an upgrade.

Ruscilli Construction Co. and National Church Residences applied for a permit to renovate the Vanderbilt Apartments building at 75 Haywood St. The

permit proposes updates to both the interior and exterior of the building, including updating the accessible apartments and repairing the parking lot.

Residents have been informed of the coming changes, according to Barbara Roth, a resident of Vanderbilt Apartments.

"Some residents want them to hurry up and get it over with," Roth said. "Some residents think the building is

fine the way it is." Others have moved out ahead of the renovations to avoid the hassle, she said.

According to the permit filed with the city, plans are to demolish the interiors of the units and reconstruct them to meet accessibility building codes, with update finishes including new door hardware and new entry doors.

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North Carolina legislature increases penalty for utility damage after substation shootings

Hannah Schoenbaum
ASSOCIATED PRESS/REPORT FOR AMERICA

RALEIGH, N.C. - Increased punishments for intentionally damaging utility equipment received final legislative approval Thursday in North Carolina after attacks on the state's electrical grid caused a dayslong blackout last December.

The bill passed unanimously in both the House and Senate in a rare display of

bipartisanship. It comes as a direct response to substation shootings in Moore County that cut power to about 45,000 homes and small businesses for nearly a week. After the Senate approved the measure in a concurrence vote, the bill was sent Thursday to Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper, who is reviewing the legislation, a spokesperson said.

Republican Rep. Neal Jackson described "an eerie feeling all over" his county as residents navigated intersec-

tions without traffic lights and gathered by fire pits to stay warm after dark.

"This would send a message to North Carolina, it would send a message really to the country: You can't do this and get by with it," Jackson said Wednesday on the House floor. His county is located about 60 miles (95 kilometers) southwest of the state capital of Raleigh.

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WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

An annual checkup for salamanders

Antoine Fletcher
Word from the Smokies

Pay a visit to Chimneys Picnic Area in Great Smoky Mountains National Park during the first days of spring, and chances are you'll hear the cheerful sounds of families enjoying meals together, downy woodpeckers drumming on the bark of deciduous trees, and a few small groups of students talking intently amongst themselves as they carefully turn over rocks and leaves.

While many onlookers may think these students are simply milling around after an afternoon picnic, in fact they are taking part in a serious mission to study and help protect salamanders found nowhere else in the world.

Since their long-term study began in 2008, Matthew Gray of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and William Sutton of Tennessee State University have been bringing groups of students to select areas in the Smokies every year to monitor salamander populations for the common pathogens known as chytrid fungus and ranavirus. Both pathogens are major contributors to the global decline of amphibians.

This year, a new group of students gathers around their professors to get their simple marching orders: find the salamanders and you may find the pathogens. The students disperse, equipped with orange flags, blue rubber gloves, and small zippered plastic bags to help them safely capture and release the park's beloved amphibians. It is not long before they begin to return, carefully bringing their salamanders to the picnic table that has become a makeshift research lab.

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Students handle a Blue Ridge spring salamander collected near Chimney Tops in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Researchers use plastic bags and gloves to move salamanders in order to avoid exposing their absorbent skin to the potentially harmful salts and oils found on human hands. PROVIDED BY NPS

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Smokies

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“We sample for about 45 minutes and then try to get as many species as possible, which usually is 5 to 10 species,” said Sutton. As the students arrive, he helps them identify the usual suspects, like the imitator or red-cheeked salamander. Each specimen is gently rinsed with distilled water, identified, and moved to a separate processing station to be measured and weighed.

Although some amphibians with extreme cases of chytrid fungus or ranavirus may seem lethargic or exhibit blood-shot red skin and skin ulcerations, the effects of the pathogens are not always visible to the naked eye. Chytrid fungus grows on dead plants in wet habitats and spreads to amphibians’ skin, inhibiting their inability to breathe. Ranavirus is transmitted through contaminated water, physical contact, or ingestion of infected tissue.

At the final station, the students collect samples from the salamanders in order to analyze them later in a laboratory. Students remove salamanders from their bags and swab their skin, which is where chytrid fungus grows. Next, they apply a small amount of pressure to each salamander’s tail, removing a small tip to be tested for ranavirus, which attacks internal organs and can be detected in blood or tissue.

“We do not know that they are infected when we are processing them, but we take them back to the lab and we use a molecular technique called PCR that identifies the DNA of the pathogen, and we can tell if they are infected or not,” Gray said.

Polymerase Chain Reaction can tell researchers if the salamanders have a low- or high-grade infection. Once the salamanders are documented, the students release each animal back to the exact spot they were captured. The next phase is waiting for lab results.

Many people have heard the phrase “no news is good news” from their healthcare professionals. Even though the research team’s goal is to perform health assessments to detect the pathogens, they’re encouraged when they fail to find the pathogens in the park. According to Gray, the team’s most recent screenings haven’t turned up much.

But while these sites have been mini-



Matthew Gray, left, and his students enrolled at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, commandeer a picnic table to conduct science in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY NPS

mally impacted by chytrid fungus and ranavirus, sites near Cades Cove in the park have seen tremendous impacts from diseases in the past.

“They have had recurring die-offs of marbled salamanders and wood frogs associated with ranavirus,” said Gray. “They can be catastrophic with thousands of animals dying in a matter of weeks.”

Human-made chemicals can also kill amphibians or stress their immune systems, leading to higher chances of transmitting pathogens.

“A lot of things that we do to the landscape can stress amphibians,” said Gray. “For example, agricultural pesticides or industrial emissions find their way into the water systems, and amphibians have permeable skin, so they just absorb the chemicals.”

Researchers are also engaging the wildlife-trade industry to ensure that additional pathogens like the chytrid fungus or Batrachochytrium salamandrivorans (also known as Bsal) does not make it to the United States. Bsal has only been discovered in Asia and Europe and is fatal to many salamanders.

“If Bsal gets here, we estimate that about 40 percent of our species could experience declines or go extinct. In the



A Blue Ridge two-lined salamander scurries beneath leaf litter near Chimney Tops in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

US, that could be 80 species of salamanders gone!” said Gray.

So, how would Bsal travel across the pond? Gray says that America is the global leader in the pet amphibian trade, but these cute, colorful amphibians such as Mexico’s axolotl are often not tested for pathogens before they are shipped to America.

“We are trying to promote healthy trade by working with the pet amphibian trade industry to develop standards and a program that certifies amphibians as pathogen-free when you buy them from a pet store.”

Salamanders may be small, but there

is a lot to learn from our tiny neighbors, especially when it comes to human health concerns and biomedical research. Do you remember the pit that you felt in your stomach when you read that students were using samples of salamander tails for science? No need to worry. Any removed tissue will grow back due to their stem-cell capabilities.

“If a salamander has a wound, then the cells around the wound can become anything they want to be,” Gray explained. “That’s how they regenerate their limbs.” Biomedical researchers are hoping that salamanders will help them understand more about the regeneration possibilities for humans soon.

“For me, it’s about the experience. Yes, we are getting good data that the National Park Service is using to monitor the health of their salamander population, but it’s about these young scientists,” he said. “This is how the students learn—through seeing, touching, and experiencing.”

Antoine Fletcher is a Science Communicator at the Appalachian Highlands Science Learning Center in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. He is often in the field with visiting researchers, creating podcast or videography, or leading the park’s African American Experiences in the Smokies project.



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