

MOUNTAINS

Guide to 2024's solar eclipse in Asheville

Will Hofmann
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

In a little over a week, a total solar eclipse will leave millions of people across North America in temporary darkness.

If you miss 2024's celestial event, the next opportunity to glimpse a total solar eclipse in the U.S. is a mere 20 years away, when Montana and North Dakota will slip into darkness in 2044.

Though not in the path of totality for 2024's eclipse, Asheville will experience approximately 85% of the eclipse during its peak on April 8, making it one of the best locations to view the event in North Carolina.

Wondering when you should put on your eclipse glasses or looking for an event to attend the day of the eclipse? Here's what you should know.

What is a total solar eclipse?

According to NASA, a "total solar eclipse happens when the Moon passes between the Sun and Earth, completely blocking the face of the Sun. The sky will darken as if it were dawn or dusk."

When is the eclipse for Asheville?

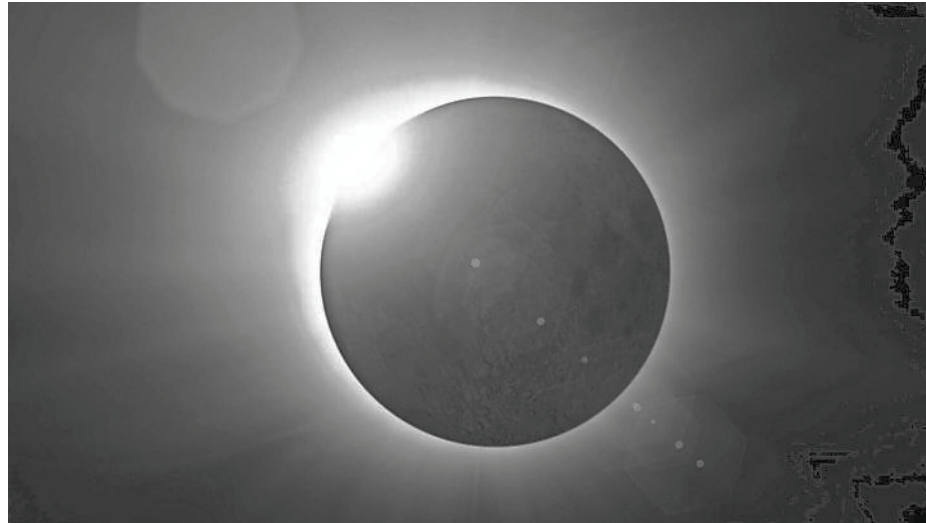
On April 8 in Asheville, the eclipse will begin at 1:51 p.m., according to NASA. Maximum coverage from the eclipse will take place at 3:09 p.m., when the moon will cover most of the sun's disk in the Asheville-area. The eclipse ends at 4:24 p.m.

Protection required for viewing

Viewing an eclipse without protective eyewear can cause severe eye injury or blindness. To prevent injury, eclipse watchers should use solar eclipse glasses ISO rated 12,312.

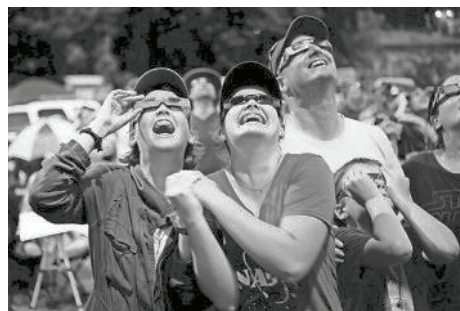
The American Astronomical Society has instructions on how to safely view or create devices to view the eclipse at <https://eclipse.aas.org/eye-safety/projection>.

Educational opportunities aplenty in WNC as the eclipse approaches. Here are a few to consider:



Heads up, total solar eclipse, blue supermoon and 'devil comet' coming in 2024

PROVIDED BY NASA



Ellie and Sydney Lang, 15 and 14 respectively, of Chapel Hill, react as the solar eclipse reaches totality at Bridge Park in Sylva, North Carolina on Aug. 21, 2017. ANGELI WRIGHT/AWRIGHT@CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

- The North Carolina Arboretum will hold an event from 1-4 p.m. April 8 with education sessions and special events. Attendees will have the opportunity to collect scientific data for the NASA funded program Eclipse Soundscapes and receive NASA eclipse glasses to safely view the astronomical event. Regular parking fees apply.

- Sylva's Southwestern Community College will collaborate with Jackson County Early College to view the eclipse alongside food trucks from 2-4 p.m. as the area will see a partial eclipse with 87% coverage. Eclipse viewing glasses will be available.

- View the April 8 eclipse at the Pisgah Astronomical Research Institute, or PARI, in Transylvania County, to learn more about eclipse research, astronomical artifacts and more during PARI's all day event. The ticket price is \$40 for children 12 and under and \$80 for adults.

- The University of North Carolina Asheville Society of Physics Students is holding an "Extravagant Eclipse Viewing Day." The event is free, and attendees of all ages are welcome to learn about the physics, astronomy and mathematics behind the eclipse and other astronomical events.

Asheville breweries are hosting eclipse events. Here are a few:

- Fairview's Turgua Brewing Co. will hold a viewing party at 2 p.m. April 8 for the eclipse, where the brewery will be handing out a limited number of viewing glasses.

- At an Highland Brewing's Rooftop 2 p.m. event, the brewery will hand out eclipse glasses to the first 100 guests.

- The Whale will be hosting an eclipse-viewing party from 1:30 p.m.-3:30 p.m. Attendees can receive viewing glasses and as the brewery pours \$5 Pivo Pils pints.

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Word from the Smokies
Arthur "Butch" McDade
Guest Columnist

Nightmare on Wolf Ridge

In Great Smoky Mountains National Park, law enforcement rangers regularly patrol the roads and trails responding to various incidents, medical emergencies, and search-and-rescue missions — all involving inherent dangers. A prime example of this dedication to public safety is that of Smokies park rangers Bill Acree and Dave Harbin, who survived a helicopter "mercy" mission that went terribly wrong on the cold morning of January 3, 1978.

On that fateful day, Acree lifted off from Cades Cove in an army "Huey" helicopter along with Harbin and other personnel on a mission to locate a missing airplane. National Park Service staff had received an emergency locator ping from a small, twin-engine Cessna 421 that had been carrying five passengers before it disappeared somewhere in the surrounding mountains.

Acree was an experienced ranger, and before coming to the Smokies, he had served in the Vietnam War and as a full-time protection ranger and recovery diver at Lake Mead National Recreation Area, a site known for many high-intensity incidents. In the Smokies, he'd also responded to many incidents and had even been on a helicopter flight a year earlier that made an emergency landing in the Smokies backcountry. So, he was no stranger to danger.

But Acree knew he was in grave danger on this January 1978 mission when he heard a loud pop as the chopper ascended and neared Wolf Ridge. He then felt a loss of power and a sinking sensation as the chopper fluttered. With rising concern, he heard the pilot yell, "Mayday!" over the intercom and heard the crew chief yell, "We're going down — prepare for impact!"

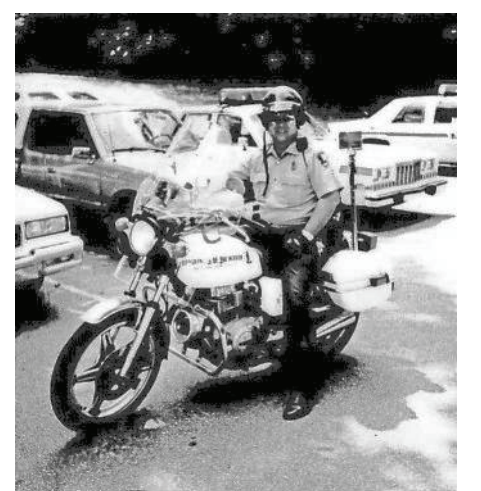
The pilot valiantly tried to keep the chopper's nose up, but the ship fell hard into the dense forest. Acree heard terrible sounds of crunching and sheering metal as the craft's rotors were ripped off. Then it inverted and slammed into the frozen earth, nose first.

In a recent interview in his home, Acree described the incident to me: "As I realized the chopper was falling, I thought of my family and what would happen if I didn't survive. I tightened my seat belt and said a quick prayer." His description of the helicopter's descent is harrowing.

"As we fell, I remember watching the trees get closer until the impact," he recalled. "When we hit the trees, I remember a whirling, blurring motion, and then there was the heavy impact, then blackness. When I came to, I was upside down. My right foot was twisted behind me, and the leg was floppy and broken."

Acree realized he was seriously injured and the flight crew appeared to be dead. He also realized the chopper's engine was still running, and he smelled fuel and hydraulic fluids. He and Harbin, who was less injured, knew they needed to get out. The only exit was a busted window below Acree, so he struggled in great pain to lower himself

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After returning to work in the Smokies one year and three days after the incident, Bill Acree went on to become a supervisory park ranger, a criminal investigator, and one of the first special agents in the National Park Service. PROVIDED BY BILL ACREE

New I-40, Blue Ridge Road interchange to begin construction in 2025

Karrigan Monk
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

A Black Mountain project that has spent more than 20 years in development will begin construction next year.

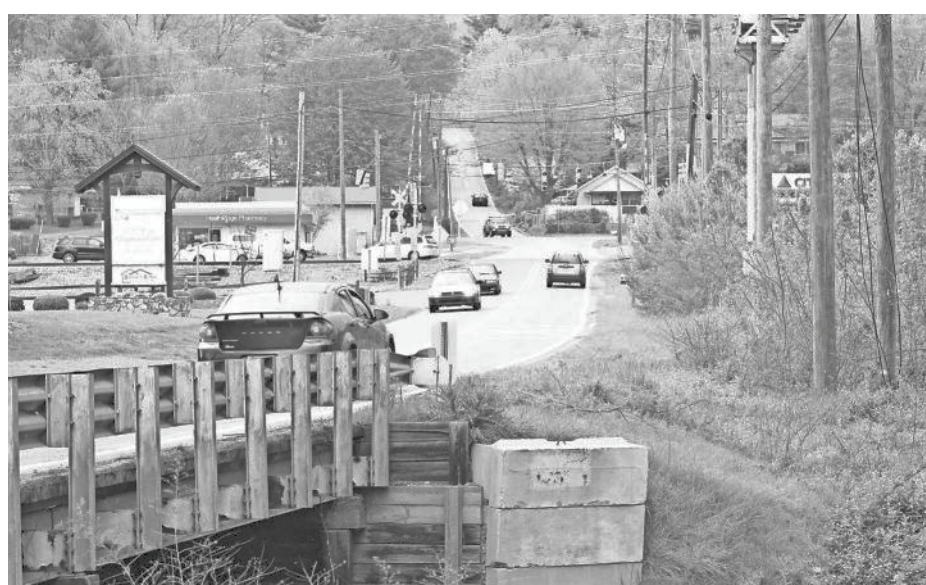
According to North Carolina Department of Transportation spokesperson David Uchiyama, the Interstate 40 and Blue Ridge Road interchange project is scheduled to start construction in September 2025. He said the department anticipates construction will last approximately three years.

According to the webpage on the project on the town of Black Mountain website, the project will convert the current I-40 and Blue Ridge Road grade separation to an interchange while widening Blue Ridge Road and constructing a new roundabout at the intersection of N.C. 9 and Blue Ridge Road.

"The purpose of this project is to provide increased connectivity, access and mobility in the Black Mountain area," Uchiyama said. "The project's need is based on projected traffic volumes and growth trends in the area. The project will help reduce congestion and truck volumes in downtown Black Mountain and reduce congestion at the nearby N.C. 9 interchange with I-40."

The project is estimated to cost nearly \$32 million and is funded entirely through NCDOT.

Uchiyama said the project is currently in the planning and design phase, as it has been since December 2018. Alternative selection, environmental studies and design and plan preparation were included in this phase. According to the town website, the final design for the project was selected in



The Blue Ridge Road-U.S. 70 intersection sees lots of traffic and is likely to see more in the future, town administrators believe. PROVIDED BY PAUL CLARK

2021.

The next phase of the project involves right-of-way negotiations and utility relocations. Uchiyama said the right-of-way negotiations are anticipated to begin this fall.

The initial construction date for the project was June 2023 with right-of-way acquisition being scheduled for June 2021, according to previous Black Mountain News reporting in 2020.

This delay was caused in part due to NCDOT announcing a 12.5% increase in spending in 2019, along with settlements exceeding \$600 million. Other projects in the state also were affected and delayed.

Originally planning for the Blue Ridge Road interchange began in 2000 with a design evaluation. Project plans were

added to the DOT Transportation Improvement Plan for 2004-10.

In 2018, the town adopted a Blue Ridge Road Small Area Plan that calls for the interchange project to include bike and pedestrian improvements that should include sidewalks and multiuse shared paths.

"These improvements are limited to the project area of the interchange," according to the website.

According to previous Black Mountain News reporting, this plan is "long-range" and looks ahead for the next 10-20 years for the Blue Ridge Road area.

Karrigan Monk is the Swannanoa Valley communities reporter for Black Mountain News, part of the USA TODAY Network. Reach her at kmonk@blackmountainnews.com.

Hoffman

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"Dr. Hoffman seeks out ways to equip them with what they need to succeed in whatever path they choose in life. We talk about all his accomplishments, but in reality, he is an even better person. He has compassion and empathy for everyone and loves to see others succeed. I am so happy that this time, we get to honor him. It would not surprise me at all if Dr. Will Hoffman is the next Superintendent of the Year for North Carolina."

Kevin Huskins, principal at Madison High School, agreed with Jackson's assessment of Hoffman and his constant efforts to continue to advance learning for Madison County Schools, which has made significant progress in a number of metrics.

Huskins categorized Hoffman as "a visionary."

"He is constantly looking for ways to improve every facet of our school system," Huskins said. "I have been incredibly impressed with his hands-on yet trustful approach. He is the constant optimist. He sees good in people, facilitates their gifts and recognizes them in a fashion that builds their confidence."

According to Huskins, Hoffman has facilitated an environment in which the main focus is the advancement of the students.

"Great leadership comes from a motivation that originates in the right place," he said. "Dr. Hoffman's motivation comes from the heart, not by political agenda or a need for self-elevation. In any conversation, whether public or private, I have yet to hear him mention personal gain. It is refreshing and meaningful to work with him on a daily basis."

In Jackson's view, Hoffman's recog-

niton is a well deserved one, as he cares for each student who walks through the doors of the school system's six schools.

"Dr. Hoffman reminds us that 'Leadership Matters' and that shows each day with Dr. Hoffman's leadership," Jackson said. "He leads from the heart. He cares for every student, family, and staff in MCS."

In a testament to his coworkers' statements about Hoffman's relentless drive to advance Madison County Schools even more, even in his acceptance of the award though, Hoffman said he has his sights set on bettering Madison County Schools students' lives, as well as those of Madison County Schools' staff.

"Moving forward, I am committed to advocating for important initiatives such as securing pay increases for teachers and classified staff, increasing funding for Exceptional Children, and I am passionate about implementing universal pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-olds, with a salary scale for pre-K teachers comparable to that of all licensed North Carolina public school teachers.

"I am genuinely thankful for this honor and eagerly anticipate continuing our shared journey of serving students and fostering excellence in education in Madison County and across Western North Carolina."

The North Carolina State Superintendent of the Year Awards Ceremony will be Oct. 10 at noon at the Grandover Resort in Greensboro.

Johnny Casey has served more than three years as the Madison County communities reporter for The Citizen Times and The News-Record & Sentinel. He was recognized with a first-place award in beat news reporting in 2023 by the North Carolina Press Association.

Eclipse

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Looking for another eclipse opportunity?

• The Nantahala Outdoor Center will host multiple viewing opportunities with glasses during rafting and mountain zip line activities. With a 88% partial eclipse, the event lasts from 1p.m.-5p.m. April 8, with tickets ranging from \$79-\$139, according to the Nanta-

hala Outdoor Center website.

• Grandfather Mountain will be hosting an April 8 event from 11 a.m.-3:30 p.m. where viewers can enjoy the eclipse in a designated area. The first 100 guests will receive a pair of solar eclipse glasses for free with admission. Tickets can be bought at <https://grandfather.com/tickets/>.

Will Hofmann is the Growth and Development Reporter for the Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA Today Network. Got a tip? Email him at WHofmann@citizentimes.com.

McDade

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and crawl out so Harbin and another survivor could exit. Acree located his park radio as he crawled out, and he and Harbin made calls for help.

"When I got out," Acree continued, "I laid on the ground and had trouble breathing due to a punctured lung, broken ribs, broken leg, and what I figured was a broken back and broken shoulder blade. I knew I had to get away, so I pushed myself a short distance. There was a 4-foot cliff nearby, so I planned to roll off it and take my chances if fuel ignited."

About an hour and a half later, an army medic descended from another chopper to assist. He and Harbin dragged Acree away from the chopper. Still later, Dr. Robert Lash, medical adviser for the Smokies, and others arrived and provided emergency aid while responders worked to clear an extraction zone.

After several hours, Acree was packaged on a litter and hoisted to a medical chopper and flown to the University of Tennessee hospital in Knoxville. He arrived there four and a half hours after the crash. Ranger Harbin, though injured, made it to a landing zone for later extraction.

Acree spent the next 10 days in the ICU, where doctors treated his multiple serious injuries while considering an amputation of his right leg. Fortunately, this was averted. He was hospitalized for two months and spent another 10 months in surgery and rehab until he returned to light work in the Smokies one year and three days after the crash. Harbin, his fellow passenger, returned to work in the park months earlier.

Ever the intrepid ranger, Acree ultimately resumed full duty in a supervisory role. Later, he became a criminal investigator and one of the first special agents in the entire National Park Service, working closely with U.S. district courts in Tennessee and North Carolina on serious criminal prosecutions before retiring in 2001.

Interestingly, Acree told me the chopper's engine hummed loudly for two

hours after the crash, providing an eerie background to the gruesome scene. He also said a later investigation determined that a fuel system part had malfunctioned, causing the crash.

Today, Acree credits park ranger Dave Harbin, Dr. Lash, and the first responders and hospital staff for saving his life. He feels a deep sadness for those who perished in the incident: Capt. John Dunnavant, Capt. Terrance Woolever, Sgt. Floyd Smith, and Lt. Col. of the Civil Air Patrol Ray Maynard. None of the passengers aboard the private airplane had survived the earlier crash. The "mercy" mission that Acree and the others attempted ultimately ended up as a nightmare, with the search-and-rescuers becoming the rescued.

"I don't think the general public really



A restroom is being cleaned at the Asheville Regional Airport recently. ASHEVILLE REGIONAL AIRPORT

Hensley

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service we strive for every day," she said.

As far as restrooms being closed when flights depart and return, Pfeffer said it can't be helped most of the time, but that there will always be an open restroom for passengers.

"We time our maintenance and service of our restrooms between flights. This does require temporary closure of the restrooms," she said. "Our custodial team has a protocol with proper signage and wayfinding to ensure that there is always a nearby restroom available for passengers to use."

The airport has four sets of restrooms and one family restroom. Two sets of restrooms and the family restroom are located after the security check near the gates.

"The other two sets of restrooms are located pre-security near baggage claim and ticketing, respectively," Pfeffer said. "When one set of restrooms is being cleaned on either side, signs are placed at the entrance of the restroom to direct people to the nearest alternate location."

While it may be an inconvenience to have to walk to another restroom, the walk is not too far, Pfeffer said.

"The distance between the restrooms at the ticket counter area and

the ones in baggage claim is only 193 feet, and the distance between the ones on the secure side is even less at 97 feet," she said.

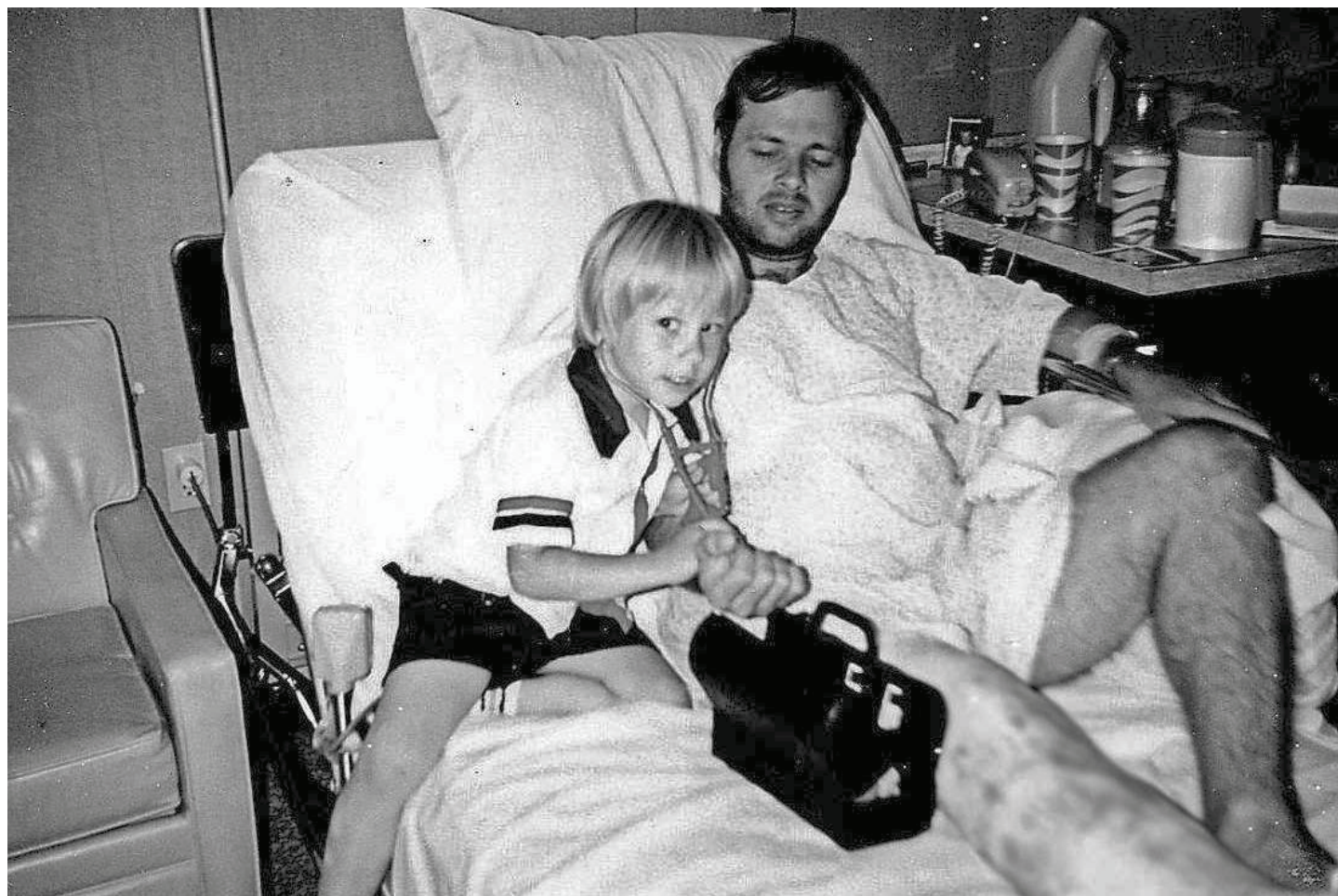
On high-traffic days, the restrooms are closed 10 to 15 times a day for cleaning, Pfeffer said.

"Our custodial team works hard to keep the restrooms clean for our passengers and guests. They are committed to efficiency and turn restrooms around quickly. A simple restock takes about five minutes," she said. "Occasionally, a full deep clean is needed that can take anywhere from 25 to 45 minutes."

Work continues on the airport's new \$400 million terminal, which is estimated to be completed in three years. Pfeffer said the new terminal will have larger restroom facilities, which will reduce closures and wait times for passengers.

"When the new terminal is completed, there will be expanded restrooms facilities for passengers to utilize with changing tables for babies as well as appropriate space for aging or differently abled travel companions and inclusive options. In the meantime, we appreciate everyone's kindness and patience," she said.

Dean Hensley is the news editor for the Hendersonville Times-News. Email him with tips, questions and comments at DHensley@gannett.com. Please support this kind of local journalism with a subscription to the Hendersonville Times-News.



Bill Acree was transported to the University of Tennessee hospital in Knoxville, where he recovered from his multiple injuries. Here, his son renders aid using his toy doctor's medical bag. PROVIDED BY BILL ACREE

comprehends the serious risks that protection rangers face in the Smokies," Acree said. "For most folks, the Smokies are a place of fun, natural wonder, and recreation. But every day, protection rangers put themselves in potential serious danger to protect the safety of visitors in the Smokies. We should all be extremely thankful for their work."

Arthur "Butch" McDade is a retired Smokies park ranger and regular contributor to Smokies Live, a blog hosted by park partner Smokies Life, which provides this column. His publications include "Old Smoky Mountain Days," "The Natural Arches of the Big South Fork," and contributions to the "Encyclopedia of Appalachia." He lives with his wife and their rescued dogs and cats in Sevierville, Tennessee.



Park ranger Bill Acree poses with his patrol car in Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the early 1970s. PROVIDED BY BILL ACREE