

MOUNTAINS

The Great American Outdoors Act will mean upgrades for the Smokies



Frances Figart
Columnist

It was a great day for public lands when, on July 23, Congress passed the Great American Outdoors Act (310-107). The bill now heads to the White House where President Trump is expected to sign it into law. What exactly does this mean for Great Smoky Mountains National Park?

“The park currently has over \$200 million in maintenance needs to care for its aging infrastructure,” said Deputy Superintendent Clay Jordan, whose job it will be to manage how the funds are spent. “In some cases, these systems need to be completely replaced.”

Most park infrastructure was developed in the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) or Mission 66 era, and is now well used, well worn, and in many cases at the end of its life cycle. As this deterioration progressed, park visitation steadily increased, reaching a record 12.5 million last year.

“Park managers are faced with many challenges in sustaining infrastructure to support this level of visitation—especially in our temperate rain forest climate with roads, trails, and facilities spread across the 522,000-acre park, and spanning elevations from 800 feet to more than 6,600 feet,” said Smokies Superintendent Cassius Cash. “GSMNP steadily competes for federal dollars to chip away at its maintenance backlog, but still has more than \$162 million in repair needs.”

Jordan said the park’s greatest needs are related to its water treatment and wastewater systems, administrative and public buildings, and transportation corridors, including roads, bridges, and tunnels. The park has identified 13 water and wastewater systems that were installed way back between 1940 and 1960 and that need to be fully replaced. Traditional funding and emergency funding have generally provided band-aid fixes that have helped to keep these systems functioning. Jordan said the cost of this full replacement is estimated at over \$41 million, and it is critical in order for campgrounds, picnic



Great Smoky Mountains National Park maintains and operates more than 300 miles of roads, six tunnels and 146 bridges. Road paving, such as that shown here on Newfound Gap Road, will be part of deferred maintenance addressed by funds provided by the Great American Outdoors Act. COURTESY PHOTO

areas, and visitor center areas across the park to serve visitors well.

“While deferred maintenance is spread across thousands of physical assets, more than 80 percent of the repairs needed are associated with the park’s roads system,” Jordan said. This is not surprising when you consider the millions who choose to experience the Smokies from behind the driver seat every year. In total, the park maintains and operates more than 300 miles of roads, six tunnels, and 146 bridges that allow visitors to traverse the park’s mountainous landscape. This network of roads—both paved and unpaved—is critical in providing safe recreational access to the park’s more than 800 miles of trails along with access to family cemeteries.

Another important consideration is the three primary maintenance and administrative areas (buildings, utilities, roads, etc.) that serve as operational hubs for the entire facility maintenance

division. Most of the buildings associated with these maintenance yards were built in the 1950s. The buildings are showing serious signs of disrepair and lack the functionality needed for a large modern-day park. The park currently has more than \$67 million in needs to replace and repair these critical facilities.

Laurel Rematore, CEO of Great Smoky Mountains Association—which runs the bookstores in Smokies visitor centers—said the current Sugarlands Visitor Center was built at a time when park visitation hovered between five and six million people.

“The facility does not provide enough space to adequately allow people to receive information for trip planning and to learn about park resources,” she said. A new visitor center is estimated to cost approximately \$25 million and would be designed to serve visitors into the next century.

Rematore added that the challenge

the Great American Outdoors Act brings for crown jewel parks like the Smokies is for the National Park Service to put these funds to work quickly and to show measurable positive impacts to Congress and the American people.

“The National Park Service must apply these funds within its framework of planning, design, environmental and historic preservation compliance, contracting, and projects oversight, while continuing to provide annual operational services to this park’s 12.5 million visitors,” she said. “We expect there will be intense pressure on the Smokies staff to lead the National Park System in retiring its maintenance backlog within the next decade.”

Frances Figart is the editor of Smokies Life magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 34,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Reach her at frances@gsmassoc.org.

BRIEFS

Mandatory evacuation ordered for Ocracoke ahead of storm

Authorities have ordered the evacuation of Ocracoke Island this weekend in advance of Hurricane Isaias.

The mandatory evacuation of residents and non-resident property owners begins at 6 a.m. Saturday, according to a statement from Hyde County.

The National Weather Service forecast indicates the storm will first increase ocean swells and cause rip currents, starting Friday and continuing into next week. Tropical storm-force winds could be felt as early as Sunday night.

Ocracoke Island is accessible only by ferry. Officials are suggesting people take the Ocracoke-Hatteras ferry route to evacuate because routes on Pamlico Sound are operating at significantly reduced capacity due to shoaling in a channel.

Ocracoke is still recovering from Hurricane Dorian. The storm hit last September, launching a 7-foot (2-meter)

storm surge over parts of the island’s village, which measures about a square mile.

Many people remain displaced or are still waiting for houses to be raised higher off the ground. The island’s one school, which serves approximately 170 students, is being rebuilt.

Last of 3 guilty in deadly home invasion to be sentenced

BANGOR, Maine – The last of three people charged in a deadly home invasion was sentenced to life in prison on Friday.

Christopher Murray, 38, of Red Springs, North Carolina, was convicted of murder last year, and the state’s maximum penalty was imposed Friday in a Bangor courtroom.

Murray, Tony Locklear, of East Millinocket, and Alexis Locklear, of Maxton, North Carolina, were charged in the home invasion in Millinocket in which 59-year-old Wayne Lapierre and his wife were shot in their home, prosecu-

tors said. Lapierre died from his wounds.

Tony Locklear, 44, is also serving a life sentence for murder. Alexis Locklear, 22, was sentenced to a year in prison for robbery.

The three people came to Lapierre’s home to rob him, according to court documents. Lapierre was a medical marijuana grower, and the three left with marijuana and cash.

Black Lives Matter group: Apology to family of man who died

WINSTON-SALEM – A Black Lives Matter chapter in North Carolina has apologized to the family of a Black man who died last year for demanding the release of jail and body camera footage leading up to his death.

“We apologize for any hurt that our support of the legal petition by several news outlets and publications for the release of this footage may have caused the Neville family or his loved ones,” Black Lives Matter Winston-Salem said

on Facebook Thursday. “We want to fully impart to them that we meant no harm in any way, and we wish to honor them and the dignity of John Neville.”

Prosecutors said John Neville, 57, died in December due to a brain injury after he was placed face down and restrained by officers in a manner that made him unable to breathe. The family had opposed releasing the footage from Forsyth County jail, but released a statement through their attorneys this week saying they now want the video released, news outlets reported.

Before his death, Neville had been arrested by Kernersville police on a misdemeanor charge of assault on a female. Six people, including five detention officers and a jail nurse, have been charged in connection with his death.

Brienne Neville, John Neville’s daughter, declined a request for comment by the Winston Salem-Journal on the group’s apology.

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