

MOUNTAINS



Bears often travel outside Great Smoky Mountains National Park's boundary in search of food, shelter, and mates. They can become used to eating human food while visiting growing park gateway communities — and then return to the backcountry seeking that same reward. PROVIDED BY DENISE MACHADO

Senate OKs budget with billions in federal aid

Gary D. Robertson
ASSOCIATED PRESS

RALEIGH — A North Carolina government budget proposal heavy on capital projects, saving reserves and tax cuts and distributes over \$5 billion in federal COVID-19 aid received preliminary approval on Thursday from the state Senate.

The GOP-controlled chamber voted 32-18 for the two-year plan, which would spend \$25.7 billion in state tax dollars next year, or a 3.5% increase compared to the current fiscal year. But budget-writers still had to account for historic amounts of federal relief, as well as a massive \$6.5 billion windfall in additional state dollars through mid-2023 announced just last week.

"I jokingly said earlier today, 'I'm embarrassed that we're spending so much of good taxpayer money in this budget,'" said Sen. Brent Jackson, a Sampson County Republican and an appropriations committee chairman. "But it is a good budget."

But Democrats said the Republican proposal misses a once-in-a-generation opportunity to address program and salary needs in K-12 schools and in health care. Teachers and state employees would receive 1.5% annual pay increases, along with bonuses ranging from \$1,000 to \$1,800. Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper's budget proposed average 5% annual raises for teachers and 2.5% annual raises for rank-and-file workers, along with bonuses.

"We have the resources to dig deeper," said Democratic Sen. Natalie Murdock of Durham County as she unsuccessfully sought an amendment to raise the minimum wage for school custodians, cafeteria workers and other staff to \$15 per hour. The Senate budget raises the minimum to \$13. Republicans used parliamentary maneuvers to deny votes on other Democratic amendments during a 21 / 2hour debate.

Still, four Democrats joined all Republicans in voting for the measure, which gets a second required floor vote Friday. The bill then goes to the House, where Republicans will pass their own plan. The two chambers then will negotiate a final proposal to present to Cooper, who has vetoed all three omnibus budget bills presented to him since taking office in 2017. Cooper wants more involvement in fashioning a final plan.

"The Senate budget mortgages the future health and education of our people to the corporations and wealthiest among us ... Just awful," Cooper tweeted late Wednesday. "Thank goodness the budget process has a long way to go."

Republicans said the tax cuts return surpluses to taxpayers, benefitting low- and middle-income tax filers disproportionately. Individual income tax rates would fall from 5.25% to 3.99% by 2026 and the 2.5% corporate rate would reach zero in 2028. Standard and per-child deductions for individual filers also would go up. In all, the individual and corporate tax changes would result in \$13.5 billion less cumulative revenue for the state over the next five years.

The budget would put an additional \$3.8 billion in the state's rainy-day reserve and \$3 billion toward a slew of state construction projects.

BearWise basics can save lives



Word from the Smokies

Frances Figart
Columnist

June is traditionally the most challenging month for managing human-bear conflicts in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. By mid-month this year, the park had already closed several campsites where bears had damaged tents and taken backpacks in search of food.

Then, in the early hours of June 18, a Tennessee teen was attacked and injured by a bear while sleeping near her family in a hammock at Backcountry Campsite 29.

"Right now, most of our issues with bears are in the backcountry, and it's not all the visitors' fault nor all the bears' fault," said Bill Stiver, the park's supervisory wildlife biologist. "Bears are stressed, trying to find their next meal, and will take advantage of any food or gear left unattended."

Black bears are highly intelligent. They have excellent long-term memory and their ability to make connections and draw associations is highly evolved. Bears are also opportunists; they eat what is readily available. They teach their young what they have learned about obtaining food, and if they have gotten it from humans, cubs learn that behavior at an early age.

The family of five at Campsite 29 was on a two-night backpacking trip and had dutifully stored their backpacks and food on the park-provided aerial food storage cables. Hanging backpacks along with food and other smellables is critically important as gear often retains the smell of food.

But despite our best efforts, food smells can linger on gear — especially for hungry bears, which have one hundred times more olfactory receptors than we have and can detect where food has been even after it's gone.

"Over the past 40 years in the Smokies, there have been several incidents involving bears and campers sleeping in hammocks," said Kim DeLozier, Tennessee coordinator for BearWild and formerly the park's supervisory wildlife biologist. "Although these attacks rarely

occur, there is always a risk of a negative interaction with a bear when camping in the backcountry."

Although it is rare, black bears do occasionally exhibit predatory behavior toward people. Since 2000, there have been six serious incidents of predatory behavior by black bears towards humans in GSMNP that have resulted in injuries or death. Two were associated with day hiking, one with a tent, and three with hammocks. Overall, visitors are more likely to be killed in a car crash than injured by a bear.

Fortunately, the family at Campsite 29 was able to drive the bear off from the area immediately after the attack and quickly notified the park's emergency communications center. Park rangers responded and provided on-site medical care to the girl overnight. When the bear returned to the campsite, the family identified it as the one responsible for the attack, and rangers shot and killed it.

"There's no good place for bears that exhibit predatory behavior towards people," Stiver said. "We cannot move them somewhere else. Nobody wants those bears in their yard."

Learning how to respond to bears in the backcountry is an important part of trip planning for visitors to the Smokies — and any park that has wild bears. That response involves yelling, throwing rocks, and doing everything in your power to scare a bear away.

"Anytime you are venturing into the backcountry, you are sharing it with not only other hikers but also with wild animals," said Backcountry Management Specialist Christine Hoyer. "Backpackers can prepare by taking steps to understand the park regulations and minimize their impact while they are out in the backcountry."

One of the best resources the park has available to assist with trip planning is the Backcountry Office. Hoyer encourages backpackers to call the office at 865-436-1297 to discuss their planned route, ask questions, and get information on current conditions.

"It can be exciting to see a bear, but we need everyone to do their part to keep them wild," said Hoyer. "Keep a safe distance, hang all food and anything with a smell in the food storage cable system, pack out everything you pack in, and know what to do if you see a

bear on the trail or at camp."

The Smokies' black bear population has grown from 600 in the 1990s to approximately 1,900 today. Bears often travel outside the park's boundary in search of food, shelter, and mates. They can become used to eating human food while visiting growing park gateway communities — and then return to the backcountry seeking that same reward.

"Since bears are adaptable and have adjusted well to urbanization around GSMNP, it is critical that communities and their leadership recognize the importance of coexisting with bears in a manner that reduces human-bear conflicts — ultimately resulting in a safer environment for residents, visitors, and bears," said Dan Gibbs of Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, Black Bear Program Leader and Chair of the BearWise Oversight Committee.

With this objective in mind, a group of wildlife managers, scientists, business leaders, nonprofit organizations, and concerned citizens formed in late 2019 to discuss the best ways to minimize human-bear conflicts in Great Smoky Mountains National Park and its gateway communities. The Smoky Mountains BearWise Community Taskforce seeks to increase awareness about human behavior's negative effects on black bear behavior.

"BearWise recommends that people hike in groups and stay together," said Gibbs. "This is because there is safety in numbers. Although being in a group didn't prevent this attack, this girl's family was able to come to her aid and intervene. It very well may have saved her life."

If you are interested in having a speaker talk to your group in-person or on Zoom about BearWise, contact National Park's Conservation Association's Jeff Hunter, facilitator of the Smoky Mountains BearWise Community Taskforce, at jhunter@npca.org. Find all the BearWise Basics for hiking and camping at bearwise.org/bear-safety-tips/hiking-camping.

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