

MOUNTAINS

'Gateway Stewards'

Park launches new training program for hospitality, tourism businesses



Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays

Great Smoky Mountains National Park has the busiest visitor centers in the National Park Service. But even so, only a quarter of its more than 12 million annual visitors enter one before starting their trip.

Instead, many visitors learn about where to go and what to do during casual exchanges with cabin hosts, restaurant servers and retail workers. Through a new training program called Gateway Stewards, the park service is partnering with the myriad hospitality and tourism businesses surrounding the Smokies, equipping their workers to deliver critical information during these encounters.

"We wanted to be able to provide consistent messaging so that it doesn't matter if you're checking in at a hotel or coming into the Sugarlands Visitor Center — you're going to get pretty similar information," said Julianne Geleynse, an education park ranger and acting science communicator for the Smokies who is coordinating the Gateway Stewards program.

Area businesses have long desired more information and communication from the park service. Limited staffing combined with the need to avoid showing preference to one business over another meant that the park had to turn down such requests. But as Geleynse came into the park's science communicator role, Chief of Resource Education Stephanie Kyriazis pitched the idea of developing a single presentation that hits on key issues the park wishes to communicate. The concept gained momentum, and Gateway Stewards was born.

The presentation shows Great Smoky Mountains National Park's position as an "economic powerhouse" of the region, responsible for an estimated \$2.1 billion in visitor spending — far more than any other national park. Preserving the park's cultural history, biodiversity, and scenic vistas is critical to preserving these economic benefits.

The park's resource management



Traffic stops as a mother bear and cub cross Cades Cove Loop Road. Seeing bears is a priority for many park visitors, but getting within 50 yards of these wild animals or allowing them to access garbage can pose danger to bears and visitors alike. PROVIDED BY EDD PRINCE

staff worked to identify the top three topics for the presentation to address and landed on weather-related safety, how to safely view wildlife and protect these animals by handling garbage appropriately and Leave No Trace principles. In addition to these topics, the presentation gives an overview of the new parking rules under Park It Forward and includes suggestions for lesser-used places that offer similar experiences to often-congested areas like Alum Cave, Laurel Falls, Rainbow and Grotto Falls, and Clingmans Dome. Front-line workers might instead direct visitors to, among other locations, Hen Wallow Falls, Metcalf Bottoms Trail, or Look Rock Tower Trail on Foothills Parkway West.

"That part of Julianne's presentation had everybody saying, 'I need copies of that slide right there,'" said Jane Maurer, business outreach specialist for Smokies Life. "I saw a lot of people taking notes."

Participants leave with a definitive list of ways they can help — by setting visitor expectations, sharing information about shuttles and alternative locations, encouraging caution when driving the mountain roads, raising awareness of the region's variable weather, and instructing visitors to keep wildlife safe and the environment healthy by securing their trash, along with other Leave No Trace principles. The presen-

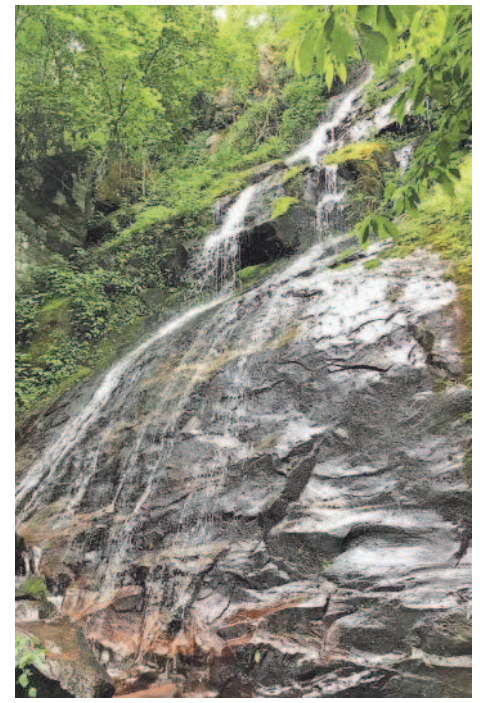
tation also explains where people can take their dogs — the Gatlinburg Trail, the Oconaluftee River Trail, Greenbriar Entrance Road, and picnic areas throughout the park.

Smokies Life and Friends of the Smokies gathered participants from their business membership programs to form the program's pilot session. These businesses were "thrilled" to be part of it, Maurer said, showing that they "really do have a connection to and respect for the park."

Pilot participants helped Geleynse identify any material missing from the initial version and create a Frequently Asked Questions website to go along with the program. One participant even suggested the name "Gateway Stewards," which the park then adopted.

Thus far, Geleynse has delivered the presentation seven times, once in person and six times virtually. Smokies Life is providing organizational support to manage registration for the program. Going forward, Geleynse expects to offer the virtual training monthly, with a cluster of presentations each spring as businesses onboard new staff for the season. These critical customer service positions tend to have high turnover from year to year.

"Giving our frontline employees the confidence to know the answer or the confidence that they know where to find the answer is very important," said Cor-



Hen Wallow Falls tumbles 90 feet from top to bottom, making it 10 feet taller than the more popular — and typically much more crowded — Laurel Falls. The Gateway Stewards program encourages businesses to suggest that visitors seek out less congested destinations like this one located in the Cosby area when visiting the Smokies. PROVIDED BY ANDREA WALTON

nelia Dobbins, vice president of sales and operations for Hospitality Solutions, which operates ten lodging properties in Sevier County. Dobbins also sits on the board for hospitality associations covering Gatlinburg, Sevier County, and Tennessee. "They are the ones that are talking to our guests every day, every shift. So, the fact that the park has made this training accessible to our employees is invaluable."

It's not just seasonal employees who benefit. Tom Wahlgren, manager for Uncle Lem's Outfitters in Pigeon Forge, lives in Knoxville after relocating from New Jersey four years ago.

"A lot of people are coming in here to see if they can buy parking passes, where they should hike, what they should do, where should they eat," Wahlgren said. "We're fielding a lot of

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MOUNTAINS

Police suggest changing solicitation rule

Chief: City should make verbal panhandling illegal in more areas

Ryley Ober Asheville Citizen Times | USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE – Police Chief Mike Lamb presented panhandling and pedestrian-motor vehicle accident data to a city safety committee June 25 that he said shows the need for expanding the areas in the city where verbal panhandling is illegal. But some city officials and members of the public questioned whether the methodology and data results actually supported that conclusion.

The data compared how many calls for service regarding panhandlers APD received and how many pedestrian motor vehicle accidents occurred in the same area. The information was much like data presented in July 2023, when city officials were considering substantive changes to Asheville’s solicitation ordinance, which were later put on pause.

In 2023, APD received 560 panhandling calls for service. Lamb said areas with a high number of these calls – such as Patton Avenue, Merrimon Avenue and Smokey Park Highway – also saw 13% of pedestrian vehicle crashes in 2023.

What data was presented?

About 17% of pedestrian crashes occurred within 25 feet of a reported panhandling location in 2023, and 75% occurred within 500 feet, Lamb said.

The area with the most calls was along Patton Avenue in West Asheville, with a total of 103 reports for panhandling. That same area had two vehicle accidents involving pedestrians last year, according to APD data.

On Smokey Park Highway, there were 38 panhandling calls and one pedestrian motor vehicle accident. There were three pedestrian accidents at certain high-panhandling areas on Haywood Road and Merrimon Avenue, which had 40 and 10 panhandling calls, respectively.

Yet, other areas such as south of downtown showed a high density of vehicle-pedestrian collisions but



Sean Alcock, who is homeless, stands in the middle of Patton Avenue asking for help from motorists on Aug. 4, 2023. ANGELA WILHELM/ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES FILE

aren’t considered areas with a lot of panhandling activity.

“Before issues of panhandling have intensified, all those corridors that have been identified have had high pedestrian collisions for over a decade,” Mike Sule, president of Asheville on Bikes, previously told the Citizen Times when APD’s first round of panhandling-pedestrian accident data came out.

Why is APD collecting this data?

This discussion comes after new “technical” amendments to the city’s long-standing solicitation ordinance were passed by city council in September to “create specificity” and bring the code into compliance with then-recent U.S. Supreme Court Rulings, City Attorney Brad Branham previously said.

The city had been discussing further panhandling limitations, including regulating vehicle-goers’ ability to give to panhandlers, but announced they’d be pausing any further changes to the ordinance in a Sept. 26 Environment and Safety Committee meeting, after a receiving a negative response from the community.

In that same meeting, Branham said APD would be collecting data to analyze the effectiveness of the amendments, pinpoint trends and “see if any additional legislative action would be necessary.”

This Environment and Committee Safety meeting was “information only,” meaning no motion or recommendation was passed on to be discussed or voted on at City Council.

Yet, Lamb said APD recommends adding what are

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those questions.”

He found the training “very informative” in answering the queries visitors often pose about the enormous park in his new backyard.

“I love the park, but I have really bad knees, so a hiker I am not,” said Dobbins. “I’ve always tried to steer away from conversations that have to do with that. But after I did the (Gateway Stewards) presentation, I actually talked to some guests in the lobby, and you would have thought that I’d been hiking for years. I was talking about the trails like I’d been on them.”

Geleynse is pleased with the positive feedback the program has received thus far and hopes to see it evolve in the years to come. For now, it’s oriented toward gateway communities in Tennessee, where wild-life and traffic congestion issues are more prevalent, but the park service also plans to design a version targeted toward businesses in North Carolina.

“The individuals that I’ve spoken with are just so happy to have some sort of engagement with the park,” Geleynse said, “because we’ve had to say no for years.”

Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org or reach the author at hollyk@smokieslife.org. To register for an upcoming Gateway Stewards program, email gateway_stewards@smokieslife.org.



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