

Briefing Statement

Bureau: National Park Service
Issue: Cades Cove Transportation and Development Planning
Park Site: Great Smoky Mountains National Park
Date: February 10, 2004

BACKGROUND:

With approximately 2.1 million visits annually, Cades Cove suffers from traffic congestion, which impacts the quality of the visitor experience and the natural and cultural resources of the cove. Travel times around the 11-mile one way loop road frequently exceed 2-3 hours, and occasionally 4 to 6 hours. The majority of these visitors come during the peak months of June, July, August, and October. Recent visitation trends, however, indicate that visitation is increasing during off-peak season months and weekdays as visitors seek less congested periods. Additionally, visitor facilities such as the visitor center and restrooms were designed during the 1960s to serve far fewer visitors and are inadequate to serve the number of visitors currently using the Cove.

The cove preserves a time capsule of historic resources and structures that represent the early settlement period of the 19th through early 20th Centuries. Intense visitor use in and around the historic structures is causing deterioration to the historic fabric. Fields and meadows have been maintained as open, allowing excellent wildlife viewing opportunities but are not representative of the agricultural community that once thrived in Cades Cove.

CURRENT STATUS:

In late 2001, the Park formed a partnership with the Knoxville Regional Transportation Planning Organization (TPO), to develop a Development Concept and Transportation Management Plan. The purpose of this planning initiative is to develop a long-range management vision for Cades Cove that will protect the natural and cultural resources and ensure that the visitor has a quality experience. The alternatives being developed address the issues of congestion and the adequacy of visitor facilities in Cades Cove. This planning initiative is expected to be complete in 2006, with completion of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and an amendment to the Park's General Management Plan.

This planning project includes an intensive public involvement effort to gather public input on issues, opportunities and impacts. Public meetings began in May 2002 and already five rounds of public meetings (14 total meetings) have been held. This public input was used to guide development of four draft action alternatives. As the planning process progresses, additional detail will be added to the alternatives and potential impacts of the alternatives thoroughly investigated. As part of the EIS process, the Park also studies the impact of taking no action. Two additional rounds of meetings are anticipated as the project moves towards completion. These meetings have not yet been scheduled. The Park and TPO are currently negotiating with a consulting firm which will be charged with revision of the draft alternatives and detailed analysis.

The draft action alternatives provide a range from minimal change to more extensive change and address transportation management, bicycle access, visitor orientation/visitor center, restrooms, campground improvements, equestrian facilities, field management, and needed operational facilities (utilities, transit staging, gates, etc.).

Public concern and comment have focused largely on the congestion issue and transportation management alternatives that might be used to address this issue. The draft action alternatives include:

- 1) Improving the pullout and parking system to improve efficiency of the road system in Cades Cove. Under this alternative personal vehicles would remain the means of access to and within Cades Cove. The number of vehicles in the Cove would not be limited but various Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) elements would be implemented to inform the visitor of traffic conditions in the Cove allowing them to make informed travel decisions. This alternative represents minimal change in visitor access and minimal means of managing the number of visitors within the carrying capacity of the resources.
- 2) Implementation of a seasonal mandatory reservation system. Under this alternative personal vehicles would remain the means of access to and within Cades Cove but the number of vehicles (and visitors) within the Cove could be managed within the carrying capacity of the resources. During the off-season there would be no requirement for reservations. This alternative offers the flexibility to make exceptions for special events such as Old Timers Day and prearranged descendent events (reunions, burials).
- 3) Implementation of a seasonal mandatory reservation system and a voluntary transit system. Under this alternative personal vehicles would remain as a means of access to and within Cades Cove. However, visitors would have the option of taking transit if desired, or if the number of personal vehicle reservations had been met. By limiting the number of personal vehicles allowed within the Cove, travel times for transit could be predicted and a schedule of transit service maintained that would not be possible with no limit on personal vehicles.
- 4) Implementation of a seasonal mandatory transit system (with the option of operating a voluntary transit service the remainder of the year). Under this alternative, personal motor vehicles on the Cades Cove Loop Road would be replaced by a transit system offering frequent and flexible service. The visitor would be able to get on and off at will, not tied to a set schedule or tour. On a prearranged basis, access exceptions for equestrian trail access and prearranged descendent events would be available.

Another key issue faced in Cades Cove is the lack adequate visitor facilities. Providing a visitor center at the start of the Loop Road experience is critical to the success of any plan to provide for a quality visitor experience and protect resources. Visitors now have little or no orientation to what they might do or experience in the Cove prior to reaching Cable Mill; the main visitor contact point located midway along the Loop Road. This lack of education contributes to resource degradation problems in the Cove (graffiti, driving through fields, etc.). Each action alternative includes a visitor center located at the head of the Loop Road. These vary in the size of facility and type of services provided.

Field management in Cades Cove has changed over the years of NPS management to now being largely maintained through cycles of mowing and some burning. This planning process provides the opportunity for public input on the desired outcome of field management and includes preparation of a cultural landscape management report. These action alternatives propose to continue maintaining the Cove as open grassland and woodlots and use fences and a rotating pattern of field management techniques to portray the essence of an agricultural community. Native grasses, wetlands and meandering field drainages were part of the pre-park landscape of Cades Cove and promoting these features would also enhance wildlife habitat. Some alternatives include the establishment of a small agricultural area to demonstrate plants, tools, and techniques typical of the settlement period.

CONTACT: Philip A. Francis, Acting Superintendent, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, 865/436-1201, e:mail: GRSM_Superintendent@NPS.GOV. **website:** www.cadescoveopp.com