



North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation Director Dwayne Patterson said he appreciated the spirit and commitment of those who fought to establish the visitor center.



Judge Robert C. Hunter serves as vice president of Friends of Lake James State Park and is a former North Carolina House of Representatives member.



U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis' western regional representative, Jordan Barnes, addresses attendees.

Park

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state purchased, according to the North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation.

North Carolina Rep. Hugh Blackwell (R-86) said the visitor center is yet another encouraging sign for Burke County and its residents.

"This is one more piece of a fantastic puzzle that we are putting together in the county," Blackwell said. "I'm delighted to play the small part in getting the Fonda Flora Trail designated as a state trail. I think where it all comes together is beyond just the outdoors and environment, Burke County has so

many great things going for it. (The visitor center) is one more attraction that builds the economy and allows us to do stuff."

Lake James State Park Superintendent Nora Coffey thanked those in attendance, including McDowell County and Burke County commissioners.

Funding for the projects is primarily provided through the N.C. State Parks' Connect N.C. Bond Grant Program package, which was approved in March 2016. The program is administered through the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation and the N.C. Parks and Recreation Trust Fund.

The Parks and Recreation Trust Fund granted Lake James State Park \$4,672,000 for the visitor

center and Cove Bridge, while the Duke Energy Foundation granted the park \$55,000 toward the visitor center's exhibit hall, Coffey said.

The National Park Service donated \$92,000 to go toward the exhibit-hall components related to the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail, and the Rostan Foundation of Valdese donated \$70,000 toward the outdoor amphitheater, according to Coffey.

"I hear any day away from Raleigh is a good day, but I know any day at Lake James is a great day," Coffey joked before introducing the three speakers for the events. Those who spoke for the groundbreaking event were former N.C. House

member Robert C. Hunter, North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation Director Dwayne Patterson and U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis' western regional representative, Jordan Barnes.

Hunter represented the 49th District in the North Carolina House of Representatives from 1980-98. It was during his tenure that legislation was passed establishing Lake James State Park. After serving in the House, Hunter then went on to serve as a

judge of the North Carolina Court of Appeals from 1998 through 2014. He currently serves as vice chairman on the board of Friends of Lake James State Park, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering conservation, education and recreation

efforts in support of the park, according to its website.

"Our group has been working on this visitor center for more than five years," Hunter said. "It's been our major topic at every board meeting. Thank you to everyone who has had an involvement in this. It's really a beautiful day and a great day for this area."

Barnes echoed Hunter's enthusiasm for the new center.

"The senator and our staff across the state work close with our conservation groups to preserve the natural beauty that we have here in North Carolina, and we have a lot of it," Barnes said.

Tillis sent Barnes with a letter to read to attendees.

"I'm happy to extend my best wishes to everyone gathered to celebrate the groundbreaking here at Lake James State Park on the new visitor center," Tillis said in the letter. "As an avid outdoorsman, I stand in awe of the spectacular views and natural beauty in North Carolina and here at Lake James State Park. This will provide a wonderful opportunity to individuals and families to explore and enjoy the vibrant part of our state, and the visitor center will be a tremendous asset for generations to come."

For more information on Lake James State Park, visit <https://bit.ly/34CTwMV>.

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PHOTOS BY JOHNNY CASEY/THE NEWS HERALD