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New Facilities Opened

Budget Cuts May Miss The Gorges

GORG NB

By Leigh Wills
News Editor

Even though some of North Carolina's state parks will likely see staffing cuts and possible closure as a result of the budget crisis in Raleigh, the Gorges State Park is moving right along with visitor improvements.

The weekend of June 21-23, the park's staff opened two new amenities: a trail leading to an overlook platform at Bearwallow Falls and another trail leading to six primitive campsites.

The improvements have been made to North Carolina's newest state park thanks to a three-year, \$380,000 grant the park received when it first opened.

"The money we're using is from the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund. We've been able to keep going forward a little bit," said Gorges Superintendent Steve Pagano. "Community and legislative support, that's been our ace in the hole."

According to Charlie Peek, the public information officer for the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation, the governor's budget cuts 29 staffing positions at North Carolina's state parks and would close Lake James and Singletary Lake. Four other parks could be forced to close two days a week.

Peek added that 13 parks would likely see some disruption of services or the closing of certain access areas.

But Gorges, he said, seems pretty safe.

"The budget situation is still undecided, but it's not likely to affect Gorges in any measurable way," Peek said. "The biggest reason is they have a very small staff to begin with. Most of the cuts are driven by staff reductions. Gorges has such a tight staff."

According to Pagano, the Gorges State Park, North Carolina's newest state park and the only one west of Asheville, has five full-time staff persons and three seasonal workers.

Pagano is particularly pleased the park has opened two new trails, one of which leads to a camping area.

From the Gorges' main access area off N.C. 281, campers hike 2.7 miles to the Raymond Fisher Place campground. The site at one time had a home. Campers can still see portions of the home site's timbers and chimney.

Each campsite has a picnic table, fire ring and lantern hook. There is also a pit toilet nearby and a fishing pond.

From the parking lot, campers just have to follow the green circles that blaze the trail. Campers must register and pay a fee before using the sites.

"They were filled the first weekend, and we really hadn't advertised that they were open," Pagano said.

The park also has its first waterfall overlook. Thanks to the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund money, as well as a lot of sweat by park staff, an observation platform was built at Bearwallow Falls.

Pagano said Bearwallow Falls is actually privately-owned, but the overlook allows people to catch a glimpse of this waterfall tucked deep in the woods. To get to the waterfall, park visitors need to follow the blue trail circles that lead from the main parking lot.

Park Master Plan

The Gorges State Park was created in 1999 after the state purchased 10,000 acres from the Duke Energy Corporation. Of that property, 7,100 acres

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became Gorges State Park. The rest is gameland that is managed by the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.

Since its creation, the park has been developing interim facilities while a master plan is developed. Pagano said the master plan, which is a blueprint for how the park will be developed over time, is nearing completion. "Interim development is just about nearing completion," Pagano said. "We've been at it for two years. Hopefully in mid-August the master plan will be presented to county commissioners and the public. The master plan has received a lot of input from the park advisory

committee, park staff and the public."

A landscape designing firm out of Charlotte has been creating the master plan based on input received from various sides. Although the master plan has not been finalized, Pagano said people can expect very little development to take place inside the park. "We limited ourselves. Of the 7,500 acres, total development will be less than 500," Pagano said.

The primary development will be the creation some day of a visitors center on Grassy Ridge, the highest point in the park. Pagano hopes the center will give people a thorough education about the Gorges and the

opportunity to look out over the park.

Pagano said versions of the master plan also call for family camping with limited RV hookups as well a one-lane loop road that will allow people to see parts of the park from their cars.

The plan may also feature a 24-hour parking area off Frozen Creek Road.

Last year the Gorges State Park drew 119,000 visitors, Pagano said, and the numbers continue to climb.

"This year we're probably seeing a 10 to 12 percent increase," he said. "Saturday (June 22) we had to close the parking lot because it was full."