

Tennessee Code Annotated 11-19-104 requires the Great Smoky Mountains Park Commission (the Commission) to prepare an annual report of its activities.

Attached is your copy of the report covering calendar year 2020. It contains information on the activities of the Commission as well as information about the Park provided to the Commission from Great Smoky Mountains National Park leadership team. Please feel free to contact me or any member of the Commission if you have any questions. You may reach me at john.lecroy@tn.gov or 865-594-2147.

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The Great Smoky Mountains Park Commission (the Commission) was created by the General Assembly in 1974 to “devote its attention to the problems of that portion of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park which lies within the state of Tennessee.” T.C.A. 11-19-101. Its charges include:

- Conferring with the National Park Service regarding policies observed in Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP)
- Providing information to Congress regarding needs of the park, including financial appropriations
- Cooperating with similar commissions in states adjacent to GSMNP
- Taking action to preserve the natural beauty and scenery of GSMNP

Commission members receive no compensation for their services. The Commission does not receive state appropriations and does not have a budget. All funding discussed for the national park projects/programs outlined below is information national park leadership has shared with the Commission.

On October 19th, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park invited the Commission and members of the public to attend a virtual interactive workshop. The purpose of the workshop was to provide input on how the Park can improve visitor experiences and alleviate congestion at some of its busiest destinations. Providing a high-quality visitor experience has grown more challenging due to recent, increased visitation. Since 2009, annual visitation to the Smokies has increased by 32%, resulting in congested roadways, overflowing parking lots, roadside soil erosion, vegetation trampling, and long lines at restrooms and visitor center facilities. The Park received a record 12.5 million visits in 2019 and has set monthly visitation records in June, July, and August in 2020.

The Commission and public learned about the current state of park visitation and was introduced to congestion management strategies used on public lands across the world. The Commission also participated in a small online group discussion providing input on how the Park might improve visitor experiences and alleviate congestion at Cades Cove, Clingmans Dome, Deep Creek, Big Creek, Rainbow Falls, Grotto Falls, Alum Cave, Chimney Tops, and Laurel Falls.

Park staff reviewed the feedback received during the workshop and plan on selecting one or more pilot projects to implement during 2021. The Commission continues to engage with park leadership and stakeholders to assist with the development of strategic long-term solutions.

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Visitors gathered at Laurel Falls on July 5, 2019



Roadside congestion and overflow parking at Alum Cave Trail on July 11, 2020

On October 29th, the Commission participated in a virtual public meeting hosted by the Park to solicit input on a proposed mountain bike trail system in the Foothills Parkways Section 8D

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corridor in Wears Valley, Tennessee. The purpose of the proposed project is to enhance the visitor experience by providing a multi-use trail system within the Foothills Parkway Section 8D transportation corridor. The Foothills Parkway was approved by Congress in 1944 as a strategy to relieve traffic pressure on the Park. The entire length of the Foothills Parkway has been acquired but not fully developed. Community interest in exploring possible recreational opportunities along undeveloped sections of the Foothills Parkway has increased in recent years. Most of the 800 miles of trails in the Park are in areas managed as wilderness where bikes are not permitted. The Foothills Parkway corridor is not managed as wilderness and could provide visitors new opportunities to experience the Park through mountain biking.

GSMNP staff identified three preliminary alternatives for the mountain bike system. The proposed alternatives accommodate riders of all abilities and could be operated by the NPS, partner organizations, or through a concessionaire. GSMNP released the Environmental Assessment for public review and comment in November and are in the process of responding to public comments. The Commission will continue to stay engaged with Park leadership, the community, and stakeholders as this new recreational opportunity develops.

On December 3rd, the Commission held a virtual meeting and heard updates from the Great Smoky Mountains National Park Superintendent Cash. Topics included GSMNP management team updates, the Great American Outdoor Act, challenges brought on by increased visitation and declining NPS staff, and current visitor experiences and resource impacts. In addition, attendees were provided updates from the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Deputy Commissioner of Parks and Conservation and the Commissioner of Tennessee Department of Tourist Development.

2021 Commission meetings have been scheduled for July 8th and October 14th. The Commission will stay engaged with the leadership team on Park initiatives including the new mountain bike trail project, and pilot projects resulting from the workshops and public input regarding Visitor Experiences, as well as other Park challenges. The Commission looks forward to working with NPS staff, the community, and stakeholders to develop sustainable solutions to these and other challenges confronting the Park.