



You are Invited to Participate

Project Background

The National Park Service (NPS) has initiated planning efforts for the Laurel Falls Trail Management Plan in Great Smoky Mountains National Park (the Park) and is seeking public input during a 30-day civic engagement period.

The Laurel Falls trailhead is on Fighting Creek Gap Road about 5.5 miles from the Gatlinburg, Tennessee entrance to the Park. The 4-mile trail leads to 80-foot high Laurel Falls (the falls), approximately 1.3 miles from the trailhead, and then ascends to the Cove Mountain Fire Lookout. The trail is paved from the trailhead to the falls. The relatively short hike to the falls and proximity to a major park entrance makes Laurel Falls Trail one of the most popular destinations in the Park with nearly 350,000 visitors per year. The Laurel Falls Trail Management Plan would guide future trail management, investment in trail infrastructure, and visitor use of the trail, and would focus on the 1.3-mile segment from the trailhead to the falls.

As part of the planning process, we are reaching out to gather public input by initiating a comment period. You are encouraged to share your observations, concerns, and ideas about managing Laurel Falls Trail. The information obtained during this civic engagement period will be used to refine the elements and alternatives under consideration, identify issues, and ensure the NPS has the information needed to move forward in the process.

After considering input received during this initial civic engagement period, the Park will develop and refine preliminary alternatives and move forward with the formal National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and other environmental compliance processes. The compliance process will include two more opportunities for public involvement, including a public scoping period held at the beginning of the compliance process and a public comment period held for the NEPA document prepared by the Park.





Trail History

Laurel Falls Trail was originally built to allow fire crews access to the Cove Mountain area. Planning for the trail and a fire tower to be built at the top of Cove Mountain began in early 1930s. The trail was completed in 1932 at a cost of approximately \$590. The fire tower was completed three years later. By the early 1960s, Laurel Falls had become a popular hiking destination for visitors and erosion was taking a toll on the trail. As part of the 1963 Accelerated Works Projects grant to the Department of Interior, the first 1.3 miles of trail were reconditioned, graded, and paved to halt the erosion. Laurel Falls Trail is the longest of four paved trails in the Park. This area is not managed as wilderness because the trail is paved. The trail corridor beyond the falls area is designated as Natural Environment Type I and is managed as wilderness.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of the Laurel Falls Trail Management Plan is to guide future trail management, investment in trail infrastructure, and visitor use of the trail. The plan is needed to:

- Rehabilitate the deteriorated trail surface.
- Address crowding and congestion concerns at the falls and along Fighting Creek Gap Road.
- Improve pedestrian flow and reduce safety risks at the trailhead, along the trail, and at Laurel Falls.
- Enhance opportunities for visitors to view and enjoy the falls.
- Reduce resource impacts associated with visitor-created trails and informal roadside parking.
- Address safety and congestion concerns associated with informal roadside parking along Fighting Creek Gap Road.
- Protect Park resources and improve the visitor experience.



The preliminary goals for the plan are to ensure Laurel Falls Trail:

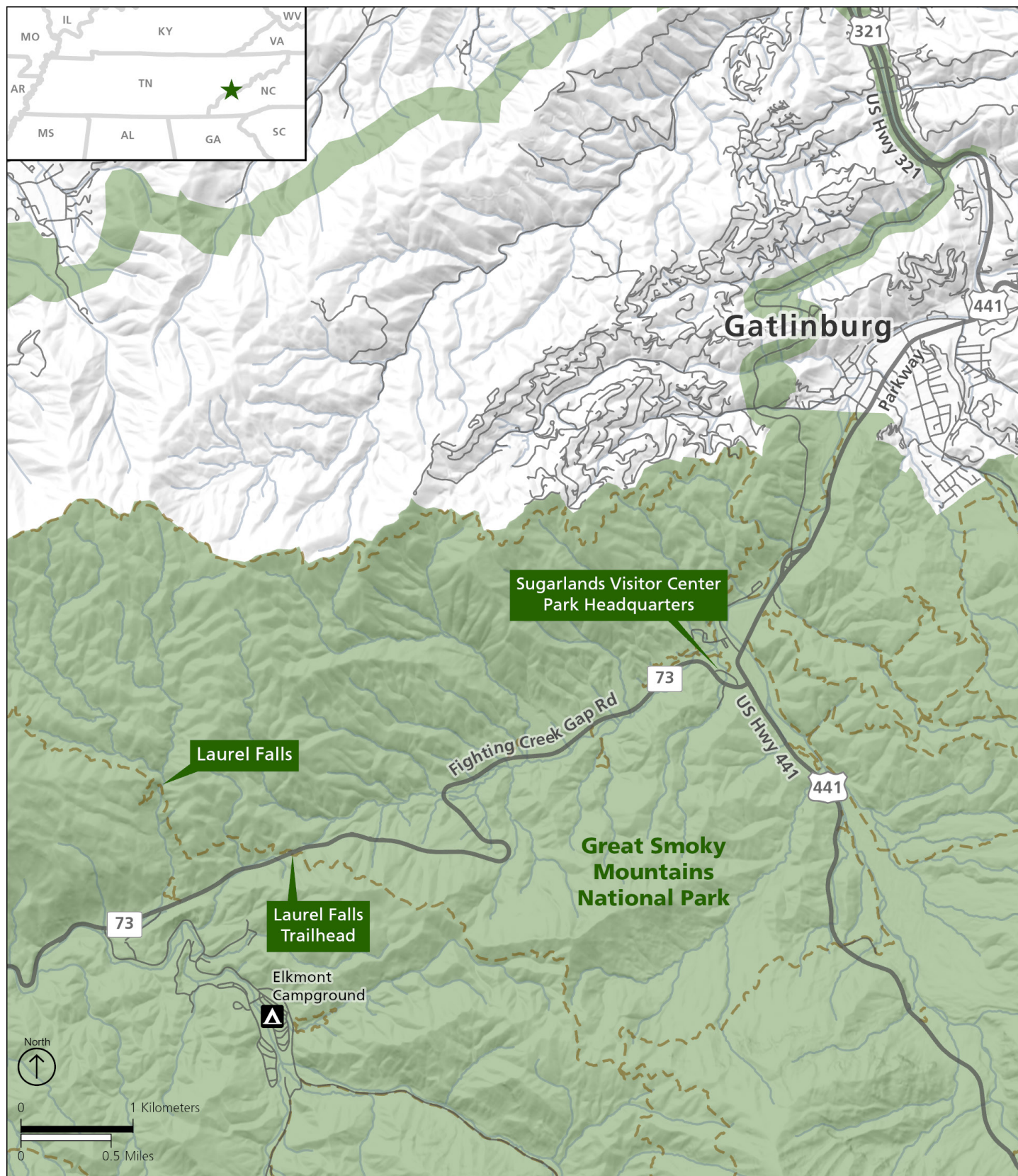
- Is sustainable, meaning the trail lies lightly on the land, will last a long time, and needs little maintenance.
- Improves pedestrian circulation and safety.
- Offers alternatives to vehicle-based visits.
- Offers experiences for a diversity of visitors and improves accessibility where feasible.
- Protects Park resources and limits impacts from trail use and visitor parking.
- Provides opportunities for visitors to understand what makes the park significant.
- Is designed and managed in such a way that allows visitors to enjoy the falls without diminishing scenic quality.
- Is manageable within the Park's personnel and budgetary resources.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park

Laurel Falls Trail Management Plan

Civic Engagement | Summer 2021

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior





Summary of Preliminary Planning Efforts

Visitor Experience Stewardship Engagement – October 2020

In 2020, the Park initiated a visitor experience stewardship engagement process. Park staff held eight virtual workshops with the public, employees, volunteers, and partners to collect their input on congestion and crowding in the Park. As a part of the workshop, Park staff presented information about the current state of the Park (<https://www.nps.gov/grsm/learn/management/ves.htm>) and a visitor use expert presented congestion management solutions implemented on public lands across the country and globe. People from 28 states provided feedback through the PEPC system, totaling 391 submissions collected. Participants had the opportunity to comment about any area in the Park but were prompted to discuss the following sites: Cades Cove day use area, Laurel Falls Trail, Clingmans Dome day use area, Alum Cave trail, Chimney Tops Trail, Rainbow Falls Trail, Trillium Gap Trail, and Big Creek day use area. The Park received 220 submissions related to Laurel Falls Trail.

Some of the key features of a desirable visitor experience for Laurel Falls Trail raised through the visitor experience stewardship civic engagement process included:

- Visitors have the opportunity to access safety information before beginning their hike. Visitors experience a well-ordered flow of foot traffic to the falls.
- Visitors have adequate physical space and time to enjoy and perhaps take photographs of the falls.
- Parking is available in designated spots.
- Visitors can safely travel from their vehicle to the trail head.

Participants of the visitor experience stewardship civic engagement proposed various management practices to improve Laurel Falls trail, including:

- Reduce or eliminate roadside parking.
- Charge a parking lot fee.
- Make repairs to the trail and falls viewing area.
- Increase the presence of rangers and volunteers in the parking area and on the trail.
- Provide information about congestion conditions to the public.
- Provide alternative transportation to the trailhead from the surrounding gateway communities.





Site Analysis and Preliminary Trail Rehabilitation Concepts – November 2020

In 2020, NPS reviewed the existing site conditions and discussed constraints and opportunities to rehabilitating the trail as well as drainage issues, safety concerns, and the visitor experience. The outcomes from this site analysis helped inform the purpose and need as well as the preliminary project elements (*see page 6*). The Park began to package the project elements into a preliminary range of alternatives that will continue to be refined based on input from the public during civic engagement, outcomes from the visitor use management workshops, and input from Park management and staff. The preliminary alternatives developed will be available for public review and comment during the public scoping period, anticipated in late October.

Visitor Experience Stewardship Workshops – June 2021

As an integral part of the Laurel Falls Trail Management planning process, the Park held two internal workshops focusing on visitor use management. Visitor use management is fundamental for maximizing benefits for visitors while achieving and maintaining desired resource conditions and visitor experiences on federally managed lands and waters. These workshops allow an interdisciplinary team to discuss and analyze visitor use management holistically. The workshops were used to guide Park staff through the steps of the Interdisciplinary Visitor Use Management Framework (the Framework) (<https://visitorusemanagement.nps.gov/VUM/Framework>).

By using the Framework, managers collaboratively develop long-term strategies for providing access, connecting visitors to key visitor experiences, protecting resources, and managing visitor use.

The first workshop focused on assessing and summarizing existing information about Laurel Falls Trail as well as defining the visitor use management direction including the desired conditions for the area, appropriate visitor activities, facilities, and services. The second workshop focused on development of indicators, thresholds, management strategies, and visitor capacities. The indicators, thresholds, management strategies, and visitor capacities will all be included into the compliance process as part of the NEPA document. Each term is explained below:

Indicators are defined as specific resource or experiential attributes that can be measured to track changes in conditions so progress toward achieving and maintaining desired conditions can be assessed.

Thresholds are defined as minimally acceptable conditions associated with each indicator.

Management strategies are general approaches of addressing visitor use management issues. Management strategies can involve engineering, education, or enforcement approaches.

Visitor capacity is defined as the maximum amounts and types of visitor use that an area can accommodate while achieving and maintaining the desired resource conditions and visitor experiences that are consistent with the purposes for which the area was established.





Preliminary Project Elements

The preliminary planning efforts outlined above have identified the following components as potential elements of the Laurel Falls Trail Management Plan:

- Rehabilitation of approximately 1.3 miles of trail from the trailhead to the falls, including a paved, barrier-free surface (asphalt or concrete), new retaining walls, and improved stormwater drainage and stream crossings. The trail may be widened to 8 feet where feasible to improve pedestrian flow. The rehabilitation would adhere to Sustainable Trail Guidelines.
- Reconfiguration of the trailhead area to improve pedestrian flow, provide orientation and interpretive opportunities, and improve the visitor experience upon arrival.
- Development of wayside areas with interpretive signage to provide educational opportunities and allow hikers to rest and others to pass without leaving the trail.
- Reconfiguration and expansion of the waterfall viewing area, which may include: redesign and replacement of the existing bridge crossing, construction of an upper falls viewing platform(s), installation of safety features like handrails where appropriate, and construction of a trail with stairs and viewing platform(s) to formalize access to the lower falls.
- Review of existing formal (paved) and informal roadside parking, including options to reduce or eliminate roadside parking, implementation of a timed-entry parking reservation system, and construction of new parking with safe trail access to the trailhead.
- Closure and rehabilitation of informal visitor-created trails.

Virtual Meeting Schedule

The park will host a virtual public meeting from 5:00 to 6:00 p.m. on **Thursday, July 22**. Park staff will present an overview of the proposal from 5:00 to 5:30 p.m. and will then be available to answer questions from the public until 6:00 p.m.

To attend the meeting on July 22 from 5:00 to 6:00 p.m., please use this link and join the meeting 5-10 minutes early to test your connection.

Meeting link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83225451780>

Or Telephone:

If you would like to call in on listen only mode and not view the presentation, please call (312) 626-6799 and enter passcode 83225451780#.



**Your participation will help shape
this Management Plan.**

How to Comment

The Park will be using the Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) website to share project information and request public feedback. As part of this process, we are reaching out to gather input by initiating a comment period, starting Thursday, July 8, 2021 and open for 30 days through Saturday, August 7, 2021.



Submit electronically (preferred method):
<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/LaurelFalls>



Mail: Laurel Falls Trail Rehabilitation Project
Great Smoky Mountains National Park
107 Park Headquarters Road
Gatlinburg, TN 37738

Project Schedule and Next Steps

The Park is soliciting public feedback before developing a full range of alternatives for the Laurel Falls Trail Management Plan. During the civic engagement period, the Park will continue to complete resources surveys to confirm potential Park resources present in the vicinity the trail.

After considering public input, resource survey findings, and information gathered during the congestion management pilot project, NPS anticipates the NEPA process could begin in October 2021, which would include a public scoping period to solicit public feedback on the preliminary range of alternatives for inclusion in the NEPA document.

