



You are Invited to Participate

The National Park Service (NPS) is preparing an environmental assessment (EA) and is seeking public input on the proposed Laurel Falls Trail Management Plan in Great Smoky Mountains National Park (the park). The park is initiating a public scoping period in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA).

The park obtained initial public input on the proposed project during a civic engagement public comment period during the summer of 2021. Input received was considered during development of alternatives to reach a preliminary proposed action. As part of the current public scoping comment period, NPS is soliciting input on the preliminary proposed action and issues that should be considered during the NEPA review. For additional information on the project and to provide your comments, please visit <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/LaurelFalls>.

Schedule

The public scoping comment period represents an opportunity for the public to be involved in the planning process for the trail management plan. The comment period will be open through January 6, 2023. Once the NPS has gathered input from this public scoping period, the agency will develop an EA in compliance with the NEPA process. There will be additional opportunity for public comment when the Plan/EA is released. Important steps in the planning process are outlined below, along with anticipated timelines for completion.

JULY/AUGUST 2021	Civic engagement period
NOW-DECEMBER 31, 2022	Public scoping period (WE ARE HERE)
JANUARY 2023	Review public scoping comments and finalize the alternatives
FEBRUARY 2023	Prepare draft Plan/EA
SPRING 2023	Release Plan/EA for public review/public comment period
EARLY SUMMER 2023	NPS decision





Hikers on deteriorated trail section with exposed soils.

Project Background and Trail History

The park is consistently the most visited national park in the country. It is situated within a day's drive of one-half the population of the United States and was visited more than 14.1 million times in 2021. Since 2011, annual visitation to the Smokies has increased by 57%, resulting in congested roadways, overflowing parking lots, unsafe parking along roads, roadside soil erosion, vegetation trampling, crowded destinations, and long lines at visitor facilities.

The Laurel Falls trailhead is on Little River Road about 5.5 miles from the Gatlinburg, Tennessee entrance to the park (see [figure 1](#)). 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 Tower. 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 and the trail was completed in 1932. 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. While the trail corridor beyond the falls area is managed as wilderness, the project area is not managed as wilderness due to the paved trail surface.

The relatively short hike to the falls and proximity to a major park entrance makes Laurel Falls Trail one the most popular destinations in the park with nearly 375,000 visitors in 2020, an increase of approximately 110,000 people between 2019 and 2020. 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.

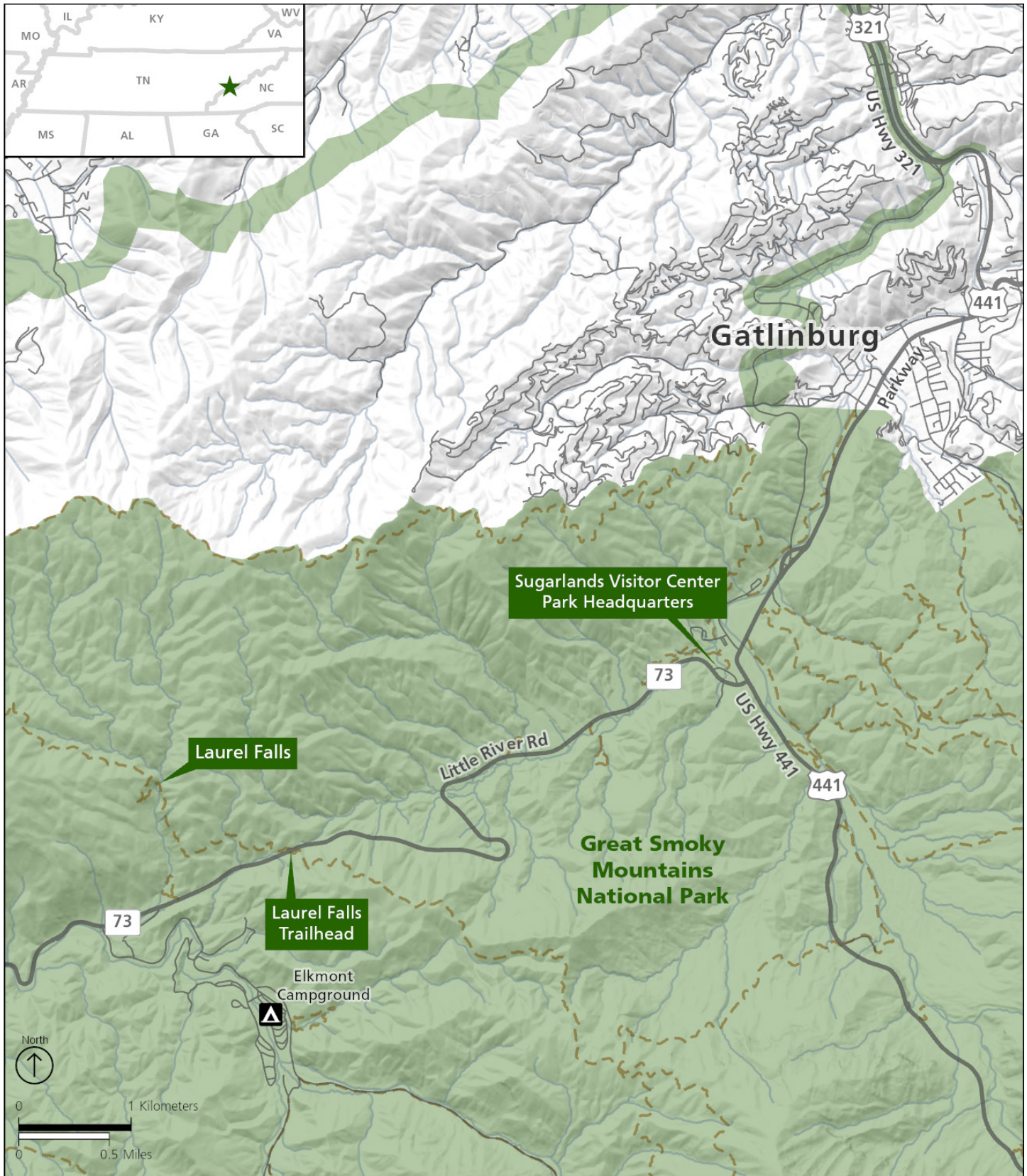


Figure 1 | Project Vicinity



Purpose and Need for Action

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

The plan is needed to:

- Protect the park resources and improve the visitor experience;
- Rehabilitate the deteriorated trail surface;
- Improve pedestrian flow and reduce safety risks at the trailhead, along the trail, and at the falls;
- Enhance opportunities for visitors to view and enjoy the falls;
- Address crowding and congestion concerns at Laurel Falls, in parking areas, and along Little River Road; and
- Reduce resource impacts associated with visitor-created trails.

The existing asphalt surface of Laurel Falls Trail is rough and uneven, with sections cracked and missing. Visitors often leave the crowded trail surface to avoid other hikers. High visitor traffic in the areas surrounding the trail has denuded vegetation, eroded soils, and exposed tree roots, especially at curves where visitors travel off-trail and create numerous informal trails (i.e., social trails). At the falls, slick rocks contribute to multiple slips and trips each year.

Additionally, parking for the Laurel Falls trailhead is limited to about 39 spaces. The paved parking areas frequently exceed capacity, with visitors parking in undesignated spots between the edge of the road and parking area. Currently, parking is available on a first come, first served basis. When designated parking lots are full, visitors park in unpaved, undesignated locations along Little River Road. Visitors then walk along the road shoulder up to approximately half a mile to the trailhead, which denudes vegetation, contributes to road congestion, and creates a safety hazard for both pedestrians and drivers.



Congestion and queuing on the existing pedestrian bridge at the falls.



Crowding at the falls.



Managing the visitor experience at a 525,000-acre park that is visited more than 14 millions times per year is inherently complex and requires an approach that can address high-priority, location-specific needs in the near-term, while also planning for long-term, parkwide solutions and allowing for adaptive management. The park initiated a visitor experience stewardship engagement process in October 2020 by holding eight virtual workshops with the public to collect input on congestion and crowding in the park, desirable visitor experiences, management issues, and possible management practices to improve the visitor experience. Based on input received during the engagement process and subsequent internal scoping, park staff identified the Laurel Falls Trail as a high-priority area for addressing visitor use issues.

As an outcome of the visitor stewardship engagement process, the park also recently completed the planning and compliance process for other visitor use management strategies such as public information campaigns, education, enforcement, and reduction of unsafe and resource-damaging roadside parking at eight high-use areas, including portions of Little River Road near the Laurel Falls trailhead. As part of a separate planning project, the park anticipates installation of roadside protection measures in the eight high-use areas by Spring 2023. In accordance with NEPA, the Laurel Falls Trail Management Plan and roadside protections project along Little River Road are considered “similar actions” because they have a similar purpose (i.e., improve the visitor experience), similar timing, and similar geography, yet they have independent utility and can proceed independently. Accordingly, the effect of roadside protections on visitor use is being considered in development of management strategies for Laurel Falls Trail. Roadside protections will also be addressed as a cumulative action in the Laurel Falls Trail Management Plan/EA.



Deteriorated asphalt trail.



Deteriorated asphalt trail with social trails with eroded soils and denuded vegetation. The yellow box highlights a visitor-created informal trail that has denuded vegetation



Desired Conditions

The Interagency Visitor Use Management (VUM) Framework defines desired conditions as statements of aspiration that describe resource conditions, visitor experiences and opportunities, and facilities and services that an agency strives to achieve and maintain in a particular area. Desired conditions describe what conditions, outcomes, and opportunities are to be achieved and maintained in the future, not necessarily what exists today. Desired conditions help to outline what a particular area will look, feel, sound, and function like in the future.

Desired conditions for the Laurel Falls Trail were developed as part of this planning effort for the visitor experience, natural resources, and cultural resources. Described below, the desired conditions were developed based on review of earlier planning efforts for the Laurel Falls Trail Management Plan, discussions

with park staff and information provided in the park's foundation document, as well as public feedback during the visitor experience stewardship effort (October 2020) and the civic engagement for this project (Summer 2021).



Visitor use at the lower falls.

Visitor Experience

- Visitors can access the trailhead from the parking lot in a way that minimizes dangerous interactions with vehicular traffic.
- Visitors with different social interaction preferences can experience the trail and the falls.
- Social interaction typically predominates, but visitors who seek less frequent interaction with people can do so by visiting the trail during times of lower visitation.
- Visitors have a high-quality experience that is not substantially degraded by crowding or safety concerns.
- Visitors with different levels of experience, fitness, equipment, and time-allotment can enjoy a high-quality hiking experience.
- Visitors are able to stop and rest along the trail at appropriate intervals without impeding pedestrian flow.
- Visitors are able to experience the falls through multiple appropriate modes: seeing the falls, hearing the rumble of the falls, and feeling the mist of the falls.
- Visitors have the opportunity to learn about and connect with natural and cultural resources as part of their Laurel Falls experience.
- Visitors experience forest and stream ecosystems where natural processes predominate.

Natural Resources

- Native vegetation, water resources, and other natural resources are maintained and restored where appropriate and feasible, including protecting and preserving Mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) to the extent possible.
- Retain streamside vegetation and keep streambanks that are largely intact.
- Trail-side resources experience minimal degradation related to visitor use.
- Interactions between humans and bears are minimized so bears remain wild and bears and humans are not harmed.

Cultural Resources

- Visitors are able to experience cultural resources in such a way that would ensure the protection of these resources and any new resources that may be identified.



Preliminary Proposed Action

As part of the Plan/EA, several elements are being considered under the preliminary proposed action. A no action alternative will also be analyzed. Under the no action alternative, there would be no change to the existing Laurel Falls Trail or parking areas. The preliminary proposed action includes several elements for management of the Laurel Falls Trail, including rehabilitation of the trail, construction of trailside rest areas and a viewing platform at the falls, parking improvements, and the implementation of adaptive management strategies to help support the desired conditions. A map of the proposed project elements is provided in *figure 2*. During construction, the trail would be closed for up to 18 months. With more than 800 miles of hiking trails in the park, other hiking opportunities would be available for visitors during the construction period. Construction of all project elements may be completed in phases, as funding becomes available.

Trail Improvements, Trailside Rest Areas, and Falls Viewing Platform

Trail Improvements

- Remove existing asphalt and widen paved trail surface with new asphalt up to 8 feet, where feasible, depending on constraints such as rock outcrops, cultural resources, and terrain.
- Improve drainage along the trail and at creek crossings.
- Improve signage.
- Improve trailhead to include a gathering area with stone seating walls to allow visitors more space to congregate before their hike and improve separation of pedestrians and the parking area.
- Consider installation of a vault toilet in the vicinity of the trailhead.



Existing trail conditions.



Visitor use at the upper falls.



Trailside Rest Areas and Laurel Falls Viewing Platform

- Construct five trailside rest areas where the trail makes sharp turns and where the trail can be widened to about 12 feet. The trailside rest areas would improve visitor circulation, allow hikers to pass one another without stepping off trail and disturbing vegetation, allow space for visitors to rest, and give rangers the opportunity to provide interpretive talks without impacting pedestrian flow.
- Install walls for seating and to contain visitors to the trail.
- Install stone retaining walls in certain locations to prevent off-trail visitor use, protect vegetation, and reduce soil erosion.
- Construct a larger trailside rest area with a 20-foot radius approximately halfway up the trail. The area would include seating and space for small gatherings and interpretive opportunities. The larger trailside rest area could also serve as a staging area for emergency response.
- Remove the existing concrete bridge at the falls and replace with a wider pedestrian bridge with a railing. A series of viewing platforms connected by stairs leading to the lower falls area would also be constructed to improve falls viewing opportunities. A new pedestrian bridge over the Laurel Branch below the lower falls would be constructed, which would connect to additional viewing platforms with stairs back up to the trail to provide improved visitor circulation and reduced congestion.

Parking Improvements

Existing and Proposed Parking Lots

- Increase parking capacity at the Laurel Falls trailhead by constructing two new parking lots to the east of the trailhead on the same side of Little River Road as the trailhead.
 - One lot would be approximately 450 feet west of Maloney Point and would accommodate 42 parking spaces.
 - A second lot would be approximately 200 feet east of the trailhead parking and would accommodate 12 parking spaces.
 - Both parking areas would include a designated pedestrian pathway to the trailhead to maintain separation of pedestrians and motor vehicles.
- Formalize existing parallel parking west of the trailhead. The current roadside parking area would be widened and formalized into a formal parking area with a designated travel lane to improve safety.
- Restripe existing trailhead parking lots to clearly delineate authorized parking spaces.



Existing trailhead.



Congestion at the existing parking lots.

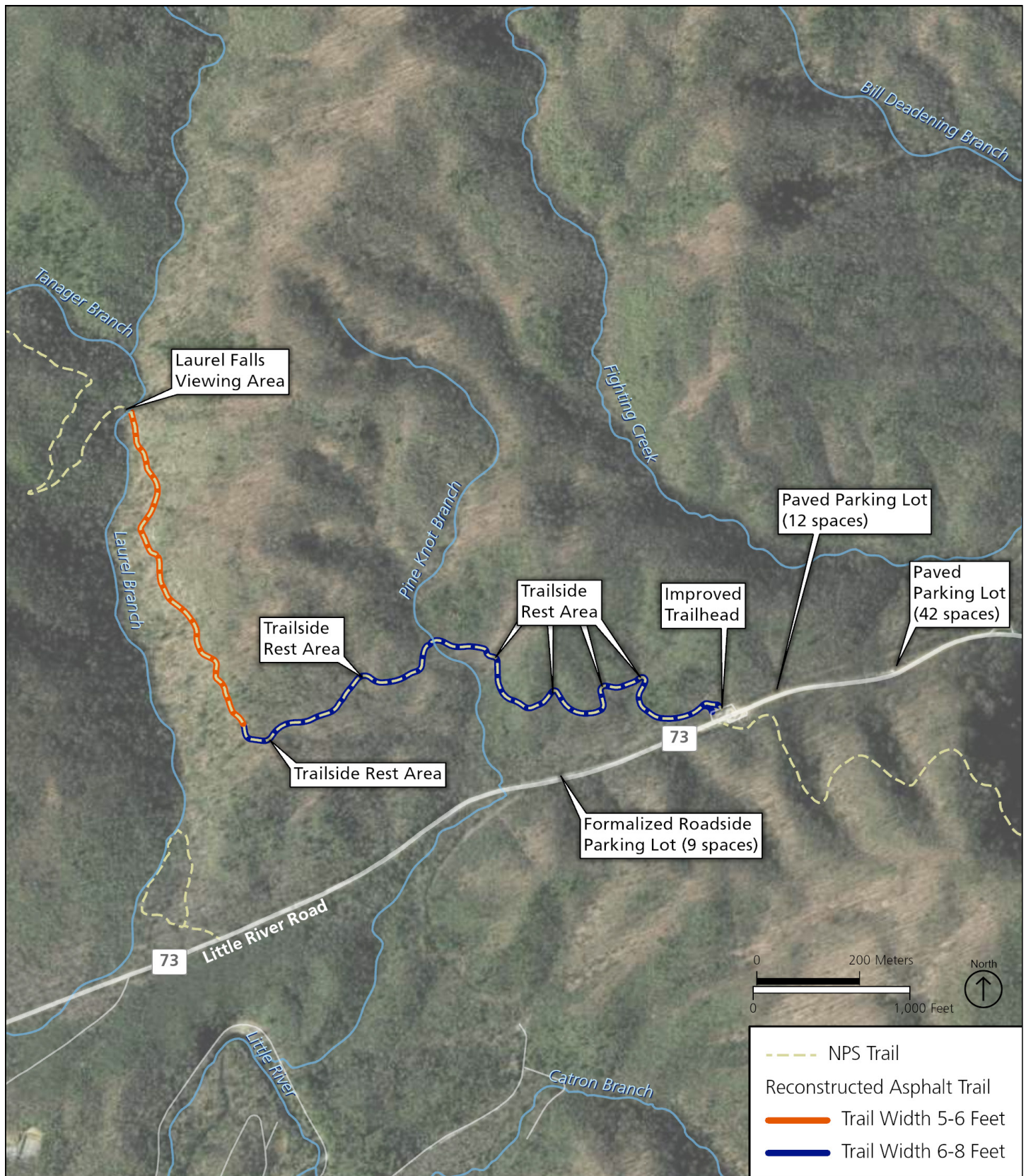


Figure 2 | Proposed Project Elements



Management Strategies

The National Parks and Recreation Act (1978) directs federal land agencies to address visitor capacity in planning documents. The Laurel Falls Trail Management Plan will meet this legal requirement by defining the visitor capacity for the Laurel Falls area (which includes both the trail and the falls viewing area), utilizing the VUM Framework. The proposed management strategies and actions listed below would help to address visitor use management issues and meet the identified visitor capacity for the Laurel Falls area.

Parking Reservation System

NPS would actively manage access to Laurel Falls Trail by establishing a timed-entry parking reservation system for the parking areas associated with the trail. Reservations for parking spaces would include only designated parking areas.

Parking reservations for the Laurel Falls Trail are unlikely to be required for all months of the year and would initially be required only for periods of peak visitation. This period would be adjusted as needed based on monitoring of indicators and visitor use. A modest charge to cover the reservation processing cost may be required.

Parking reservation tickets would be obtained through a third-party operator such as [recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov). The number of parking spaces managed by the reservation system would depend on the parking capacity and the implementation of a shuttle system.

The number of reservations released by the system would be managed to maximize capacity while maintaining desired conditions. A percentage of reservations would be set aside for short-term purchase (i.e., day of, day before, week of). After initial implementation of the reservation system, the number of reservations or the length of time a parking reservation is valid would be adjusted to ensure the highest possible use of the existing parking supply while avoiding parking-related congestion. Reservations would also accommodate users of the trail section beyond the falls as well as Sugarland Mountain Trail, which is accessed from the same parking area as the Laurel Falls Trail.

Shuttle Service

A shuttle service could be provided to allow visitor access to the site while maintaining desired conditions. The shuttle system would be owned and operated through one of the following options or a hybrid approach: NPS, non-profit partner of the park, or commercial entity.

The shuttle route would run to the Laurel Falls trailhead with potential for other stops as deemed necessary. Parking for the shuttle would be outside park boundaries.

A fee may be charged for the shuttle service. Shuttle service may be reserved through the third-party provider or may be offered on a first-come-first-served basis. Limiting shuttle service to advanced reservations only could be a means of controlling capacity if necessary. For example, if visitor use on the trail is exceeding trail capacity, the number of people per shuttle could be reduced or the interval between each shuttle could be increased. Pulsing large numbers of visitors to the site would be avoided by controlling shuttle vehicle size.



Unsafe roadside parking and pedestrians walking along Little River Road.



Issues and Impact Topics

Based on feedback heard during the civic engagement process as well as internal scoping, the park has identified several resource concerns for analysis in the Plan/EA. These impact topics include:

- Visitor Use and Experience
- Vegetation
- Bats
- Historic Resources

Are there other issues or impact topics you feel the Plan/EA should analyze?



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

How to Comment

Until **January 6, 2023**, there are a variety of ways you can submit comments:



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



Submit written comments by mail to:
Laurel Falls Trail Management Plan/EA
Great Smoky Mountains National Park
107 Park Headquarters Road
Gatlinburg, TN 37738