

Briefing Statement

Bureau: National Park Service
Issue: Proposed Morgan Falls Bicycle/Pedestrian Bridge and Connecting Trails
Park Site: Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area
Date: September 3, 2009

Background:

- The idea of a pedestrian bridge across the Chattahoochee River in the vicinity of Morgan Falls Dam has been advanced for the past 10-15 years by local citizens and organizations. The bridge would link a planned 30 acre city park adjoining the river in Sandy Springs with nearly 400 acres of National Park Service (NPS) property on the Cobb County side of the river.
- The enabling legislation for Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area (P.L. 95-344) encourages access to the recreation area that does not require the use of motor vehicles. Amending legislation (P.L. 106-154) authorizes the park to cooperate with local governments to link units of the recreation area with other open spaces of the river corridor.
- In 2003, the Sandy Springs Conservancy funded a concept design and feasibility study for the bridge that identified potential bridge locations, designs, costs, and permitting requirements.
- In the spring of 2008, the Trust for Public Land facilitated a greenprint plan for the City of Sandy Springs to identify potential green space and park lands. The NPS was invited to participate on the greenprint stakeholders committee. The greenprint plan revealed that Sandy Springs is 99% developed with extremely limited opportunities for green space and public parks.
- In June 2008, the NPS facilitated a meeting with Cobb County Board of Commissioners Chairman Sam Olens, Sandy Springs City Manager John McDonough, representatives from Georgia Power and the Sandy Springs Conservancy to assess the level of interest and support for a bridge and connecting trails. All parties expressed support. The NPS Centennial Initiative was considered a potential funding source at that time, and Cobb County and Sandy Springs committed to jointly contribute 50% of the cost of the bridge, estimated at \$1.2 million. Georgia Power agreed to donate land to the NPS for the bridge landing on the east (Sandy Springs) side of the river. The Sandy Springs Conservancy agreed to fund the Environmental Assessment (EA) required for NEPA compliance.
- In August 2008, Superintendent Dan Brown met with Cobb County District 4 Commissioner Joe Thompson to present the project proposal and assess his level of support. Commissioner Thompson voiced his support for the project.
- Commissioner Thompson was not re-elected in November 2008. In March 2009, Superintendent Brown met with incoming District 4 Commissioner Bob Ott. Commissioner Ott shared anticipated concerns of his constituents, but did not officially express a position on the proposed project.
- In February 2009, the Sandy Springs Conservancy contracted with Jordan, Jones & Goulding (JJ&G) to prepare the EA for the proposed bridge and connecting trails. The NPS reviewed the scope of work to assure that the document and process would meet NPS requirements for NEPA.
- In March 2009, Supt. Brown met with Sandy Springs Mayor Eva Galambos to discuss the proposed bridge. The possibility of charging entrance fees at the planned Sandy Springs river park to access NPS property via the bridge was discussed.
- On April 1, 2009 the park distributed early coordination letters to agencies and stakeholders including the Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Georgia Environmental Protection Division, State Historic Preservation

Office, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Atlanta Regional Commission, City of Sandy Springs, Cobb County, Upper Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, and the Trust for Public Land.

- The first public scoping meeting was held on April 30, 2009 to present the general concept for a bridge and connecting trails on NPS property. The NPS requested public comments to develop alternatives for evaluation in the EA. The comment period was open for 30 days.
- The park developed draft alternatives based on these comments and met with and requested input on these draft alternatives from Cobb County and Sandy Springs officials in early June. The park then presented the draft alternatives at a second public meeting on June 17. The NPS requested additional public comments during a second 30 day comment period to refine these alternatives and seek any additional alternatives that had not been expressed during the first comment period.
- During the two public comment periods the park received 563 comments. 394 comments expressed support for the bridge, and 127 comments were opposed to a bridge; 42 stated no preference. Of those in favor of a bridge, 364 preferred the bridge and trails to be bicycle accessible, 17 wanted a pedestrian only bridge, and 13 wanted a bridge but did not specify whether they wanted it to include bicycle access or be pedestrian-only.
- Nearly all of the comments received from those identifying themselves as Sandy Springs residents voiced support for the proposed project. Comments received from Cobb County residents were mixed, with some in favor and some opposed. Issues identified in supporting comments:
 - 1) value of connectivity from both sides of the river to the other side
 - 2) ease of access from Sandy Springs to NPS property including Hyde Farm
 - 3) more direct access from Cobb County to Sandy Springs/Fulton County
 - 4) value in linking communities and park lands along the river
 - 5) safe recreational and commuter opportunities for bicyclists
- Most of the opposition to this proposed project is from those living near the proposed bridge or within east Cobb County. Issues identified in opposing comments:
 - 1) bridge may allow crime to spread from Sandy Springs to Cobb County
 - 2) bridge and trails will allow more people to use the NPS property, ruining the solitude enjoyed by adjacent residents and creating negative environmental impacts
 - 3) bicycle access creates the potential for illegal trail access by mountain bikes at Hyde Farm
 - 4) prefer tax dollars provide increased funding for Chattahoochee River NRA operations
 - 5) unfair to charge an entrance fee for Chattahoochee River NRA at the entrance to Hyde Farm unless a fee was also charged at the Sandy Springs river park bridge access
 - 6) Sandy Springs park development plans and their care of natural and cultural resources
- Following the second 30 day public comment period the NPS developed final alternatives (attached) which include five options:
 - 1) "No Action"
 - 2) bicycle/pedestrian bridge with multi-use trail
 - 3) pedestrian-only bridge with foot trail
 - 4) no river bridge; multi-use trail
 - 5) no bridge; foot trail

The trails would follow an existing Colonial Pipeline corridor and dirt road along the river. The pipeline corridor trail would cross three drainages, requiring two bridges and one culvert. For safety, cyclists would be required to dismount and walk their bicycles on a steep section of the dirt road. None of the alternatives allow bicycles on trails within the Hyde Farm historic zone.

- In July 2009 Supt. Brown met with Sandy Springs and Cobb County officials to present the final alternatives for consideration and evaluation in the EA.

Current Status:

- JJ&G has completed most of the draft EA including the impact analysis for each alternative. The NPS has not yet reviewed the draft EA or identified a preferred alternative.
- The EA is on hold pending Supt. Brown's return from assignment as Acting Deputy Regional Director, Southeast Region. The NEPA process will resume in January 2010.
- No funding source has been identified for this proposed project, and will not be sought until a decision document has been completed that identifies the outcome of this proposed project.

Next Steps/Strategy:

- The NPS will use the Choosing by Advantages (CBA) process to evaluate and select a preferred alternative. The CBA workshop will take place in early 2010.
- Once a preferred alternative has been identified, JJ&G will complete the draft EA and the NPS will schedule a third public meeting to present the draft EA, followed by a 30 day public comment period. Final steps of the EA process typically include issuing a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). It is not anticipated that the findings of the EA will indicate the need to initiate an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

Interested Parties:

City of Sandy Springs, Sandy Springs Conservancy, Cobb County, East Cobb Civic Association, North River Forest subdivision residents, Sierra Club, Trust for Public Land, Upper Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, Bike Cobb

Congressional District: 6th, GA
Representative: Tom Price
Senator: Johnny Isakson
Senator: Saxby Chamblis

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