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Shenandoah National Park News Release

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National Park Service Denies Madison County Request to Establish New Park Entrance on Rapidan Road

Shenandoah National Park Superintendent Jim Northup announced today he has denied Madison County's request to establish a new entrance for motor vehicles into the national park on Rapidan Road in Madison County.

In a six-page letter sent to County Administrator Mr. Ernie Hoch and the members of the Madison County Board of Supervisors, Northup said that he respected and appreciated Madison County's special relationship with former President Hoover and their pride in that history. However, Northup further advised the County that after careful consideration, he could not support the County's proposal to upgrade the lower section of the Rapidan Road nor open the upper section to public motor use for private cars and commercial van tours as called for in the County's May 6, 2013, proposal to the park.

In making his announcement Northup said, "I truly appreciate Madison County's interest in taking advantage of their proximity to Shenandoah National Park and looking for ways to better serve the visitors to our beautiful area. However, after careful review of the County's proposal and the laws, policies, and planning documents that guide my decisions as the park superintendent, I cannot support this particular proposal."

The County's proposal to the National Park Service contained three major components:

- a call to upgrade the lower section of the Rapidan Road, which is already open to public motor vehicle traffic and provides access to a portion of the park, the Rapidan State Wildlife Management Area, Rapidan Camps, Inc. (a private camp along the road), and the existing hiker and equestrian trailhead below the former Presidential Retreat, known as Camp Hoover or Rapidan Camp;
- a proposal to establish a new entrance for motor vehicles by opening the upper portion of the Rapidan Road (above the park gate);

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- and a request to allow limited commercial vehicle access for guided van tours.

The County's proposal called for allowing nearly 30,000 vehicles per season to access the park from this new entrance. Similar proposals, advanced in 1939, 1947, and 1985 have also been denied by Presidential veto, the Secretary of the Interior, and a National Park Service Regional Director, respectively.

In responding to the County, Northup acknowledged that certain portions of the lower Rapidan Road are currently in rough condition, and indicated that the National Park Service would be willing to participate in further discussions with the County and other key stakeholders about modest improvements in the maintenance of the road, but could not support any significant change in the fundamental character or use of the road. In his letter, Northup pointed out that the "Lower" Rapidan Road is the only administrative road in all of Shenandoah National Park currently open to public motor vehicle use, and that in his opinion, the road is already fulfilling its essential, appropriate purpose of providing a rugged and backcountry experience to anglers and hunters within the State Wildlife Management Area, as well as, access for hikers and equestrians at the existing trailhead. Northup further advised the County that the park would be willing to discuss the possibility of a reputable tour company offering a walking tour to Rapidan Camp from the existing trailhead, but could not support opening the upper road to private motor vehicle use or commercial tours. In his letter, Northup also suggested other potential areas of collaboration between the County and the park, including exploring how the park can be helpful in reinvigorating "Hoover Days" – the annual celebration of the County's special relationship with President Hoover, which has waned in recent years.

In making his announcement today Northup said, "I look forward to working with all of our surrounding counties on appropriate projects to further develop the nature based and heritage education tourist economy in our area. But, Congress and the courts have repeatedly made it clear that my primary responsibility is to protect the natural and cultural resources of the park. After careful consideration of Madison County's proposal, it is my judgment that upgrading the lower section of the road, establishing a new entrance, and opening the upper Rapidan Road to motor vehicle use is not appropriate, nor consistent with the significance and purpose of this park."

Due to the high level of public interest in the proposal, the park's full response to Madison County is available for reading at www.nps.gov/shen/parknews/index.htm.

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