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Chattanooga conservationists, health advocates puzzled by Moccasin Bend plan

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Despite the National Park Service calling it "one of the most unique units" in its entire system, the Moccasin Bend National Archeological District is far

from Chattanooga's most popular park or attraction.

But in the 20 years since Moccasin Bend was approved to join the national park system, those who treasure the historically significant — and to some, sacred — land believed the 768-acre district on the peninsula framed by the winding Tennessee River would one day reach its full potential as a premier destination sought out by locals and tourists alike.

That's in part due to the understanding that the state of Tennessee would eventually relocate its psychiatric hospital known as Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute, which occupies about 90 acres on the bend. The aging facility opened its doors in 1961.

In late 2021, Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee's administration presented a plan that would use \$276.52 million of the state's share of federal American Rescue Plan Act dollars for much-needed renovations on the safety-net hospital that serves East Tennessee adults with severe and persistent mental illness — most of whom lack health insurance and other means to access the care they need.

Question 1 of 1

Should Moccasin Bend mental health facility be rebuilt on site or elsewhere?

- ☐ On site
- ☐ Elsewhere

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For Mickey Robbins, founding president of the group that in 1995 revived efforts to officially make Moccasin Bend a national park, the state's move indicated the time had finally come.

"It really could be a win-win situation where the hospital would come off of the bend into a more appropriate, probably urban, location," Robbins said in a phone interview. "At the same time, it would free up the Moccasin Bend National Archaeological District into a fully integrated National Park that would have great benefits for the community."

Now Robbins — who has also served multiple appointments on the mental health institute board, including a recent two-year term as chairman — and others committed to seeing the hospital relocate are fighting to keep that prospect alive. Hamilton County's state legislative delegation in July unanimously endorsed a proposal to rebuild the state-owned facility within a smaller footprint on its current tract.

The state owns an estimated 86 acres on the Moccasin Bend peninsula. Under the renovation proposal, the new hospital would occupy roughly 13 acres, although that could expand depending on state needs. The leftover land would be absorbed by the National Park.

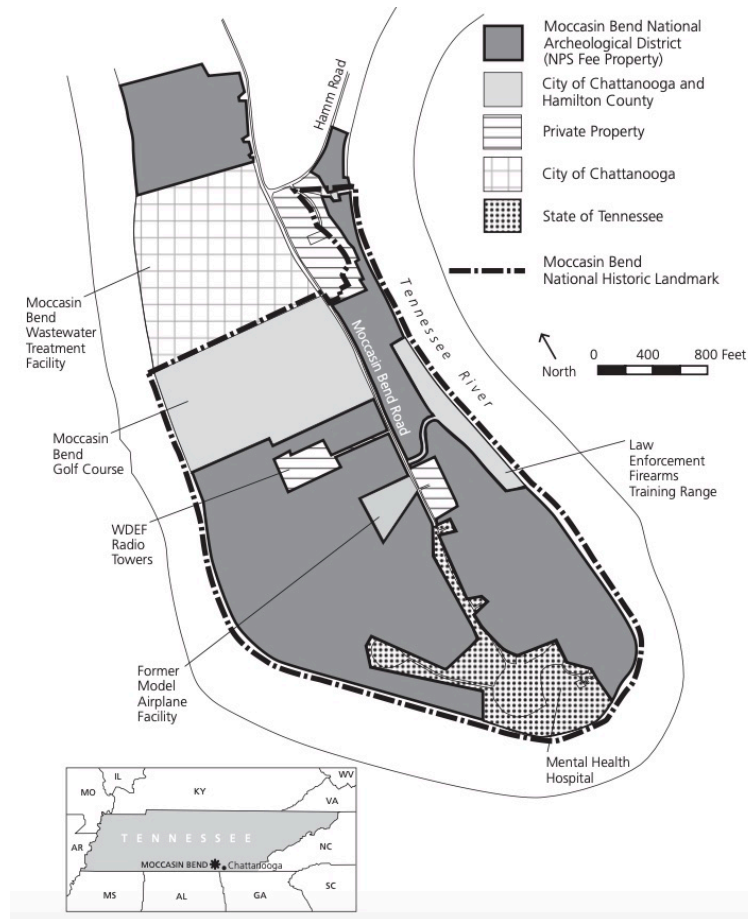
Tennessee officials are scheduled to determine the project's next steps during a State Building Commission meeting Thursday.

NOT THE DEAL

Fran Mainella, who served as director of the National Park Service from 2001 to 2006 under the George W. Bush administration, said in a phone interview that she would never have agreed to bring Moccasin Bend into the park system had she known that rebuilding the hospital on the peninsula was an option.

"If they go ahead and try to rebuild that facility there or anywhere on that land, it's going to be certainly against the whole premise of it coming in as a park," Mainella said.

In 1950, Congress enacted legislation authorizing the secretary of the interior to accept Moccasin Bend into the Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park, but the land was never transferred. That's because several incompatible developments had cropped up over the years, including the mental health hospital, a municipal golf course, a law enforcement firearm training range and radio towers.



National Park Service image / A map from the National Park Service shows the varied land uses on Moccasin Bend.

A feasibility study from the U.S. Department of the Interior published in January 1999 stated that in order to transfer Moccasin Bend to the National Park Service, the land should closely resemble the peninsula at the time when the 1950 legislation passed.

"While the Moccasin Bend Archeological District is nationally significant regardless of the present land uses, it is not feasible to be managed as a unit of the national park system with these current uses continuing," the report said. "Providing visitors a quality experience in a landscape reminiscent of its past is currently not possible. In order to comprehensively protect archeological

resources and provide for additional research opportunities, the present uses should be removed.

"Tourists would visit Moccasin Bend in larger numbers if it looked and felt like a unit of the national park system," the report said.

Having the hospital and other incompatible structures within the district, Mainella said, would have typically made the property ineligible for national park status.

Officials had to jump through numerous hoops to secure waivers granting exceptions for the bend. Those behind the effort — including former U.S. Rep. Zach Wamp, who championed the legislation to create the archeological district in 2003 — "went out of our way" to ensure the land could become a park with the understanding that the hospital and other structures would eventually be demolished and their sites restored, Mainella said.

"It was the expectation for why we were able to get waivers in order to allow us to make that a park, even though it had non-complying facilities there," Mainella said. "I know it was the intent — because I was very involved with all that. That building, that facility, would go away."

Until July, it appeared that Hamilton County's legislative delegation agreed.

CHANGE OF HEART

In a letter to state officials dated May 10, Sen. Bo Watson, R-Hixson, wrote that it was time for a "more detailed, decision-oriented conversation" regarding the Moccasin Bend mental health facility.

Watson's letter states that Marie Williams, commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, had provided a list of four options for the Hamilton County delegation to consider as possible sites for a renovated psychiatric hospital: a property behind the current site on Moccasin Bend, a property adjacent to Erlanger Medical Center, a property off Lee Highway and a property off Snow Hill.

The letter states that the delegation believed the Erlanger and Lee Highway sites were the only viable options for a future hospital. Watson said that the next step would be to schedule a meeting with the commissioner and Rep. Patsy Hazelwood, R-Signal Mountain, to discuss the plans.

"This concurs with the positions of the mayor of Hamilton County and the mayor of Chattanooga," Watson wrote. "All agree that Moccasin Bend should be restored as a park and the mental health facility relocated from this site."

([READ MORE: Chattanooga mayor proposes moving psychiatric hospital](#))

In a phone interview, Hazlewood said that she and Watson became invested in the future of Moccasin Bend through serving on the General Assembly's finance committee. Millions in state funds are regularly directed toward the hospital for infrastructure needs that could be better addressed by a full renovation, she said.

"It kept it operational, but the facility is just not designed for mental health care as it's provided today," Hazlewood said. "Finally, we have budgeted money for that facility."

According to Michelle Sanders Parks, spokesperson for the Tennessee Department of General Services, the state looked at 40 potential sites for a replacement hospital. While the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services makes decisions specific to its facilities, the Department of General Services is charged with evaluating sites and determining feasibility.

Parks did not respond to requests for more information about those sites, including a list and cost/benefit analyses, nor did the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services make any Moccasin Bend officials available for an interview. Parks said she was unable to provide a more detailed response since the proposal is still under review.

The search included potentially available property in Hamilton County and surrounding areas that were up to 30 acres in size, could accommodate a 200-bed facility and parking for visitors and staff, totaling approximately 255,000 square feet with a suitable buffer, Parks said via email.

Cost estimates for a new site location and mental health institute were based on the average market construction costs, the size of the structure, purchase of the land, configuration of the building on the site, parking, availability of utilities and other factors, she said.

Hazlewood said that the department determined that the Lee Highway site wasn't a good fit because it is in a residential area, and the site near Erlanger would be too expensive.

Because the state already owns approximately 86 acres on Moccasin Bend, Parks said that would eliminate the acquisition cost of land for a new facility,

which would be located on approximately 13 acres where the vacant "Winston" building currently sits.

Hazlewood said already owning the land is "a huge step up" over having to purchase property. Other locations would take more time to acquire and prepare for construction, she said.

From Hazelwood's perspective, that's too long to wait given the current shortage of psychiatric beds in the region. Uninsured patients who rely on safety-net facilities like Moccasin Bend are far more likely than patients with health insurance to spend several days or weeks waiting in emergency departments for a bed to open up in order to be transferred.

"According to the information that we were given, if you choose a site different than on the property at Moccasin Bend, then it adds up to 18 months to two years to the time that would be required to actually get the facility open," Hazelwood said. "I just don't think we have that time with the situation that we have currently in our state."

SERVING THE VULNERABLE

Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute acts as a safety net for some of Tennessee's most vulnerable citizens, treating patients who typically have no other inpatient behavioral health options or resources available to them. Most patients at Moccasin Bend have a severe and persistent mental illness and are hospitalized on an emergency, involuntary basis, according to the facility's website.

In the fiscal year that ended June 30, there were 2,349 patient admissions at the facility, according to a spokesperson for the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. Of those admissions, 87.9% of patients were uninsured, and the remaining 12.1% of patients admitted to the facility had various forms of either private or public insurance, including TennCare or Medicare.

The facility serves 52 counties in East Tennessee. Hamilton County had the highest representation of patients, followed by Knox County and Putnam County, where Cookeville is located.

Founded in 1961, Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute has 165 beds across five acute psychiatric care units and one sub-acute care unit. Some of the services for patients include crisis stabilization, medication management, individual and group therapy, recreational and occupational therapy and dual diagnosis treatment for individuals dealing with both mental health and substance use issues.

Though they're in the minority, patients include individuals who have been charged with or convicted of criminal behavior related to their mental illness. Most patients stay on average 6.71 days.

"While most of our patients are treated and released on an acute (short-term) basis, we do have a significant patient population that is receiving treatment on a longer-term or sub-acute basis, including a subset that has been in treatment for longer than six months," department spokesperson Matthew Parriott said via email.

Dr. Sudave Mendiratta, a Chattanooga emergency medicine physician who studies the connection between homelessness and mental health, said in a phone interview that he suspects a big fear surrounding relocation in a more suburban or urban area is that wherever the hospital goes will see a "swarm" of homeless, mentally ill people that depress property values and increase crime. But that narrative is not supported by facts, he said.

Not only are modern behavioral health hospitals extremely secure, he said, but Chattanooga is already home to numerous community mental health centers and inpatient psychiatric facilities.

"These aren't hotspots for murder, violent crime or anything else like that. These are places where people can go to get healed and help, just like a doctor's office," Mendiratta said, noting that behavioral health care has evolved since the era when the Moccasin Bend facility was constructed. "Now we know mental illness is part of our society. We can treat mental illness. We can welcome those individuals because they're our friends, family and neighbors."

For long-term residents, Mendiratta sees potential therapeutic value in having a hospital in a more pastoral setting. At the same time, he believes the region could better serve behavioral health patients — and potentially save money — by bringing the facility into the city rather than keeping it geographically distant.

It takes roughly 40 minutes round-trip for ambulances to transport patients to Moccasin Bend from the emergency departments in downtown Chattanooga.



Staff Photo by Robin Rudd / Tennessee's 60-year-old Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute in Chattanooga could be in store for a \$276.52 million transformation thanks to federal stimulus dollars under a proposal under consideration by Gov. Bill Lee's administration. The Institute was photographed on November 16, 2021.

"If I have severe, persistent mental illness, and I'm going to be in a mental health institution for life — I would rather be out there on the peninsula, because it's beautiful," he said. "If I know I have a three- or four-day length of stay, and I need to get back to my community, and I need to be connected to larger health care resources, and I need to be responsible for taxpayer dollars — to not have long ambulance rides, or something like that — then I can be more proximal to the larger health care facilities."

While there's an argument that staff enjoy working on the picturesque peninsula, Mendiratta said, there are many ways to create natural, healing environments in urban buildings. And there are other intangible benefits that come with being physically closer to the region's only academic medical center and major hospitals, he said.

Those benefits include increased visibility, collaboration, data sharing and research opportunities.

"Seeing somebody with a Moccasin Bend name badge on when you go out to lunch downtown — it demystifies the place," he said. "It's not scary. It's a place of healing for some of the most vulnerable individuals of our society."

ECONOMIC ARGUMENT

The cost of relocation is a key argument among those who support keeping the hospital on Moccasin Bend. But former national parks director Mainella said that leaders should consider how much potential revenue would be lost by leaving it there.

A fully developed national park will attract people from not just Tennessee and the Southeast but all over the country and world, she said, which is why communities fight so hard for national park status.

"It's a dangerous move on the part of the state of Tennessee to put a new facility or rebuild that facility or make it active again. It needs to let that park come into its full ability to be that economic stimulus to the state," Mainella said.

The Moccasin Bend National Archeological District is unique in that it spans 12,000 years of continuous human habitation, starting with the Paleo-Indian Period in 10,000 to 8,000 B.C., up through the Cherokee removal in 1838. It also carries Civil War-era significance.

At just a 2-mile drive from the Tennessee Aquarium in downtown Chattanooga, Robbins said its close proximity to the city is what sets it apart from many other national parks.

"Most national parks are in remote locations, so they may be beautiful locations but it's very rare to have one that's so close to a downtown," he said. "It represents an opportunity not only for tourists but local citizens and the urban youth to come out and experience the outdoors, learn about the environment and provide education about Native American life."

Robbins said he's heard the argument that building elsewhere would be more expensive and take more time, but it's impossible to know which options are the most costly or if more cost-effective alternatives exist with the available information.

"This whole approach has been sold to our congressional delegation with very little consultation with the community," he said. "There's a lot of us here that have an interest in it, from the National Park Service to the National Park Partners to city and county governments, health care folks, environmentalists and outdoor enthusiasts."

Keeping the facility on the bend also comes with a significant cost, Robbins said. For example, builders would need to take great care not to disturb additional land that may have culturally sensitive resources. Several Native

American tribes also consider the land sacred and will likely have objections to the construction, he said.

"These delays could be substantial, and during that time the construction costs could escalate," Robbins said. "So I don't know that from a true, real dollar standpoint you're gonna save a lot because of wading through the issues of being a National Historic Landmark, the National Preservation issues and the tribal artifact questions."

FOR EVERYONE

Jay Mills, a retired archeologist and current member of the National Park Partners, said that the process of selecting a new hospital site has been vastly different from the process that led to establishing the park 20 years ago.

"We had many, many scoping meetings with a huge amount of public input, and it was a public group that came together to make it happen," Mills said, noting that those who oppose keeping the hospital on the bend want what's best for mental health, too.

"But we also want to see the non-conforming uses removed from Moccasin Bend so that it might be opened up for interpretation and use by the public as intended to not only preserve it but make it available for everyone," he said.

NO PERFECT PLAN

Currently, public access to many of the Moccasin Bend's most promising archaeological sites is extremely limited due to hospital security measures.

Hazlewood said the Hamilton County delegation wanted to make the property whole as a park, as well.

"But when you start weighing all the options and look at all the circumstances, then this is the best compromise that we could come up with," she said, noting that 90% of the state-owned property will become available for the park.

"I would hope that people would look at the work that has gone into this and realize that this was not a decision that was made lightly or quickly," Hazlewood said.

While the location of the new facility remains heavily debated, there's broad consensus that it's desperately needed.

"It's not the perfect plan, because there is no perfect plan out there, but this is the best plan to both get as much of that acreage back into the national park system as we can while still providing for the mental health needs of East Tennessee," she said. "Those needs are genuine, they are real and they're growing every day."

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Elizabeth Fite was the healthcare reporter for the Chattanooga Times Free Press. She covers rural healthcare, hospitals, health insurance, public health and health policy, with a focus on explaining and investigating how healthcare systems and safety-net programs work — or don't — for the people who depend on them. She joined the



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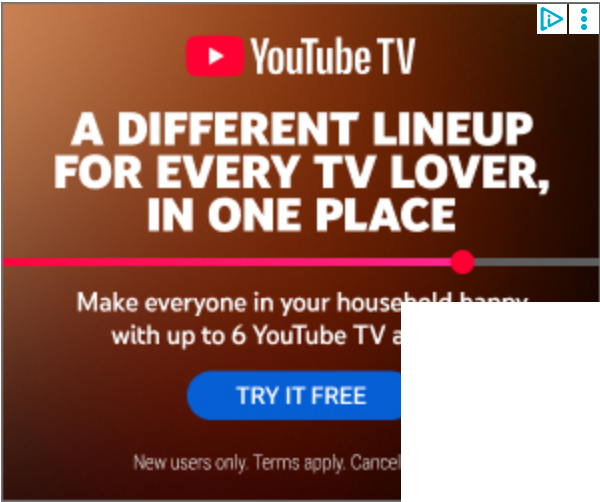
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