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Moccasin Bend public forum seeks transparency, preservation

April 9, 2024 at 8:00 p.m.

by [Ben Benton](#)

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148 Films / This aerial photograph taken Feb. 6 shows the current state mental hospital slated for replacement, foreground, along with the adjunct Winston building site, in the background, where a replacement hospital is proposed to be constructed.

A public forum set for Thursday will focus on the past, present and future of Moccasin Bend in the face of state plans to build a new state mental health hospital atop land important to indigenous American history stretching back more than 12,000 years.

National Park Partners, the supporting nonprofit organization for the 956-acre Moccasin Bend National Archeological District established in 2003, is hosting a forum Thursday for stakeholders whose voices the group contends have been left out of the conversation.

"We've made a lot of mistakes at Moccasin Bend over the years," Tricia Mims, the organization's executive director, said in a phone interview. "There have been tragic losses of culturally sensitive resources from the dredging that was done. We have not done right by this landscape. It's shameful."

If you go

— What: Moccasin Bend Public Forum.

— When: 5 p.m. Thursday.

— Where: Skyline Loft at Ruby Falls, 1720 Scenic Highway, Chattanooga. Registration is free, but space is limited, so reservations are required. Register to attend at bit.ly/MocBendForum.

Source: National Park Partners

She said the forum was organized "because this is a public land, and the public deserves the chance to learn about the importance of this place."

Ahead of the forum, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians passed a resolution against plans for a new hospital.

During a tribal council meeting last week, the tribe formally opposed new construction at Moccasin Bend, citing the area's cultural significance to the Cherokee people, according to a report from the tribe's official news outlet, One Feather.

Photo Gallery

Moccasin Bend summit set



Other voices

Mims said there has been no opportunity for input from the public or stakeholders such as the National Park Service or the 23 Native American tribes with historical and cultural connections to the area, and there is much to lose.

"What's at stake is a generational land-use decision our children and grandchildren are going to have to deal with," Mims said. "If a new hospital is built — the one that's there now has been there for 60 years — so we're probably looking at another 60, 70, 80 years of this continuation of the opposite of preservation. This is our chance to get it right."

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

A fully interpreted park would have a significant economic benefit and could become a point of pride for the community, she said.

Event speakers

- Jim Ogden, Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park historian.
- Brad Bennett, Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park superintendent.
- Jay Mills, historian and archaeologist.
- Former Chattanooga City Council member Sally Robinson, part of the Moccasin Bend Task Force in 1982.
- Former Congressman Zach Wamp.
- Chattanooga Parks and Outdoors Director Scott Martin.
- Hamilton County Mayor Weston Wamp.

In 2014, a study examined the economic impact of an expected 250,000 additional visitors a year, according to Mims.

"That equates to a \$20 million annual economic benefit for that many visitors," she said, noting the figure is 10 years old. "Not to mention that this is the legacy of every Chattanooga and everyone who lives in Hamilton County. It's on the

city seal, it's on the county seal, it's embedded in our DNA that this is our landmark. For our residents to be able to have this 1,000-acre national park within minutes of downtown is almost unheard of for a park of that size to be so accessible."

Those who attend Thursday's free event, according to Mims and forum information, will learn about the archaeological and indigenous history of Moccasin Bend; a century of preservation efforts from Chattanooga Times Publisher Adolph Ochs in the 1920s to National Park Partners today; the National Park Service's plans for interpreting more than 12,000 years of human habitation — from Paleo-Indians to the Trail of Tears and the Civil War Campaign for Chattanooga — and current threats to Moccasin Bend's nationally significant and sacred resources.

Opponents of plans for a new hospital on Moccasin Bend fear a state archaeological study — launched as a last step before moving forward with the planned construction — will fall short if Tennessee and local leaders fail to include the voices of those interested in preserving the bend.

A three-phase study, like the one performed by the federal government more than 25 years ago when Moccasin Bend first joined the National Park system, should be the standard for an archaeological assessment of what exists below the land's surface, said former Congressman Zach Wamp, R-Chattanooga, who wrote the legislation that created the district in 2003.

One of a kind

Moccasin Bend is one of a kind, Wamp said.

"Humans have gravitated to where the plains, waters and mountains meet," Wamp said in a phone interview. "But on Moccasin Bend, right at the tip, is where people have lived for 12,000 years."

The state's current archaeological study, if not performed in depth, will be short-sighted and could fail to meet the legal requirements for exploring its historical significance, Wamp said. He said the study should be a "phase 3"

study, which means archaeological excavation to locate evidence of known, previous civilizations.

A phase 3 study was what was performed when the archaeological district was formed in 2003, Wamp said, and that was required for any proposals falling within the landmark footprint.

"If a phase 1 study is all the state's going to do then ... well, then the word 'travesty' comes into play," Wamp said.

Moccasin Bend report

Some of the archaeological discoveries on Moccasin Bend to date are listed in the National Park Service's Moccasin Bend Cultural Landscape Report:

- Hampton Place, a complex containing two large Late Mississippian (1350-1540 A.D.) towns potentially visited by Spanish explorers.
- The Mallards Dozen, a prehistoric village that includes Early/Middle Archaic period (8500-2000 B.C.) occupation deposits and a concentrated Middle Woodland (200 B.C.-500 A.D.) period component. Archaeological testing discovered a Middle Woodland period structure dated at 405 A.D.
- The Vulcan site, which contains buried archaeological remains from the Archaic and Woodland periods, including a Late Archaic period house dated to 1335 B.C. Archaeologists consider the house one of the earliest formally built dwellings in the Southeastern U.S.
- The Woodland Mound Complex, a grouping of mounds associated with ceremonial and burial practices of the Late Woodland period. Located on the Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute grounds, the mounds were partially excavated in 1915 and represent the most noteworthy mortuary center from the period in the area. The exact number of mounds is unknown.
- The existing Civil War sites at the southern tip of Stringer's Ridge are the best preserved of all the physical remains from the Battles for Chattanooga, and the only surviving features from that engagement associated with Union Army activities.

The report also notes the mental health hospital buildings carry historical significance in that local architect Mario Bianculli, a pioneer of modern architecture in the Southeast who is considered "Chattanooga's first modernist," designed most of the facility.

Source: National Park Service's Moccasin Bend Cultural Landscape Report, April 2014

Matthew Parriott, spokesperson for the Tennessee Department of Health, the state agency overseeing the study, said archaeological work began Feb. 5 at the site for the proposed new hospital, on the site of an adjunct building called the Winston Building, northwest of the main facility.

"The next step is a survey using ground penetrating radar," Parriott said via email, adding a geoarchaeological survey will begin after that.

"All of these tests, observations and data collection will be formulated into a report for decision-makers to evaluate whether the site is appropriate for construction," he said.

A new hospital

In September, the Tennessee Building Commission gave the project the green light. But state Mental Health and Substance Abuse Commissioner Marie Williams announced during her presentation to the commission that the state would first have an archaeological survey done on the site. The state set aside \$265 million for construction.

"If the survey is acceptable, then we will proceed with the razing of the Winston Building and construct the replacement hospital and parking garage on that site," Williams said in September.

During the meeting, National Park Partners members said the state could become embroiled in a "no-win confrontation" with Native American tribes over religious matters that could result in costly, time-consuming lawsuits.

(READ MORE: Next phase of Moccasin Bend archaeological district launched)

The new hospital was in Gov. Bill Lee's plan presented in November 2021 calling for a replacement facility that would boost beds from 165 to 200 and increase space for conducting assessments. Moccasin Bend is the state government's

only East Tennessee regional facility and serves 52 counties. Three other mental health institutes operate in Nashville, Bolivar and Memphis. A fifth institute in Knoxville closed in 2012.

Meanwhile, a [petition opposing the hospital — "Save Moccasin Bend!" on change.org](#) — had more than 2,600 signatures as of Tuesday.

12,000 years

At the end of the Ice Age 12,000 to 13,000 years ago, humans had scattered to nearly all ice-free parts of the world, including the North American continent they reached about 15,000 years ago, according to the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.

Over the vast majority of those thousands of years, the only feet to have trod on what is known today as Moccasin Bend were those belonging to indigenous people, and it was a uniquely attractive place to live for its locations on a flood plain near a river and sandwiched between the mountains of the river gorge. According to archaeologists, the river 10,000-12,000 years ago and earlier flowed more powerfully and often flooded the western side of the bend, leaving behind silt that created land perfect for human dwellings.

The bend has been home to indigenous people from transitional Paleo-Indian/Archaic through Woodland and Mississippian periods, up to the Native American people who lived there when Europeans arrived in the 1500s, according National Park Partners board member and archaeologist Jay Mills.

In an interview at the Chattanooga Times Free Press, Mills and archaeologist Lawrence Alexander said the Winston Building, where the proposed replacement hospital is to be built, sits atop and adjacent to some of the most important habitable lands on the bend, though nearly all of the land has cultural significance.

"The Winston site is the primo place," Alexander, who has participated in archaeological work all over the Bend, said in a phone interview. "When they rebuild, they destroy it."

During the Woodland period — 2,500-1,100 years ago — houses dotted the floodplain terraces of Moccasin Bend, and several burial mounds have survived between the Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute, adjacent parking lots and roads, the archaeologists said.

Across the hospital campus, Alexander and Mills said, construction has disturbed and displaced the shallower traces of the Indian presence, but the deeper elements, corner posts of houses, storage pits and burials, were typically deeply dug and likely still survive beneath buildings. And, if soil was being added to the site by flooding or erosion, over thousands of years of use, then earlier houses, hearths and artifacts would be buried and preserved even deeper.

Dredging of Moccasin Bend

In the middle of the 20th century, Tennessee was already planning the construction of Interstate 24 at the foot of Lookout Mountain on the other side of the Tennessee River from Moccasin Bend, and in 1964 a 265-foot-long dredge boat was in the middle of a project to cut away 2.7 million yards of earth from Moccasin Bend's "sole" to prevent the river and its main channel from being narrowed by interstate work to build up the shoreline on the other side river, according to a 1964 Chattanooga Times article about the project.

The materials cut away from Moccasin Bend's shoreline, referred to as "slurry," were dumped onto the interior of the Bend, according to Mills and Alexander. The slurry very likely contained considerable archaeologically important materials that were dumped over others that already existed there.

Since then, much of the most important land to study has been inaccessible because of the mental hospital and the archaeological value is unknown, according to Mims, Mills and Alexander.

On Thursday, Mims hopes to see the Skyline Loft room at Ruby Falls filled to capacity and that decision-makers take notice, she said.

"This is our chance to finally get it right, to be the generation that finally did right by Moccasin Bend," Mims said.

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