

## ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

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### Budget at least acknowledges national parks

A glimmer of hope is better than no glimmer at all. With that caveat, we welcome the news that President Bush's budget proposal includes more money for the Blue Ridge Parkway and Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the chronically underfunded natural gems of Western North Carolina.

The president's plan calls for an 11 percent increase in budgets for both the Smokies and the Blue Ridge Parkway. The president's proposal could mean an additional 47 seasonal employees for the Blue Ridge Parkway, according to Superintendent Phil Francis. The parkway, which is staring down the barrel of a \$3 million deficit, could certainly use those workers — nine law enforcement officers, 14 visitor center personnel and 24 maintenance workers.

Still some shortages

Of course, 47 seasonal employees won't make up for the dozens of permanent staff positions that are vacant, and the funding bump won't erase decades of underfunding. The Congressional Research Service reported two years ago that the maintenance backlog for the nation's park system was between \$4.5 billion to \$9.7 billion, and that the system's annual operating shortfall was more than \$600 million a year.

The backlogs mean neglected trails, a shortage of rangers and deteriorating facilities. They have also resulted in visitation charges for some parks, increased plans for "outsourcing" some services and functions and a quiet push for corporate naming rights and sponsorships for some facilities and projects.

The question is whether the proposed funding will materialize. That will bring us to the plan itself in a moment, but first it's important to take a look at the overall budget proposal.

Presidential budgets

In recent decades, presidential budgets have become more political theatre than actual spending plans. They represent broad policy outlines, which Congress can choose to flesh out or not. Normally, presidential budgets are pronounced dead on arrival. This one hasn't been, but the guess in this corner is the reason for that is the freshly-minted Democratic controlled Congress would rather have a live budget to kick around for awhile.

As far as budgets go, this one does deserve some kicking.

The plan calls for a balanced budget in 2012, but does so on some breathtaking assumptions. One is that the Alternative Minimum Tax, a measure passed in the 1960s to assure that the very wealthy pay at least some tax, won't be fixed. As it stands, the AMT will begin hitting 40 million more or less middle class taxpayers by 2012. It will cost an estimated \$93 billion to fix in 2012. To not fix it is political suicide for members of Congress, regardless of party.

The budget also provides zero dollars for the war on terror after 2009. Not even the rosiest of scenarios anticipates the total eradication of terrorism in two years.

Further, it includes politically poisonous cuts to Medicare and Medicaid, resurrects the federal forest land fire sale plan to fund schools that deservedly died last year and anticipates making permanent massive tax cuts in a time of massive deficits and war.

In short, it's a budget that has a lot of problems to be ironed out.

'Troubling' provision

Back to the parks proposal: A least one congressman, Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., was incensed with part of the plan, calling it "an illusion conjured by this administration."

Here's the part of the budget pitch that Rep. Rahall is referring to: "The Centennial Initiative has the potential to provide up to \$3 billion in new funds over 10 years. It includes the President's Commitment of \$100 million for activities to achieve new levels of excellence in America's parks, the President's Challenge for the public to contribute at least \$100 million annually to support parks, and the President's Match to private donations for signature projects and programs on a dollar-for-dollar basis up to \$100 million each year. If the public rises to the challenge, the Initiative could provide up to \$300 million on top of regular funds for park activities in 2008."

Indeed, there are plenty of "up to," "ifs" and "coulds" in there, enough to prompt Rahall to say, "The administration's increasing reliance on the private sector in this capacity is troubling. Our national parks are national treasures, and their funding is a national priority."

In the end, that's the point. These are national treasures. For WNC, they are also major economic engines. We have to take care of them.

Congress will have to work hard with the administration to achieve a realistic budget. But we urge them to rise to the opening the president has given our parks system.

The proposed funding increase must survive if our parks are to survive.

On the Net: [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2008/interior.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2008/interior.html)