

# Bush's budget may help parkway

## The Blue Ridge Parkway would receive a slice of funds allocated for the national park system.

By [Tim Thornton](#)

381-1669

It's not a lot of money in federal budget terms, but it's a big deal to the superintendent of the Blue Ridge Parkway.

The president's 2008 budget proposal includes \$1.5 million to hire seasonal workers and do maintenance along the parkway, and the chance to get more money from the private sector. All in all, it could solve some of the problems that have bedeviled the parkway in recent years.

"We're really ecstatic," Superintendent Phillip Francis said Wednesday.

More seasonal workers will mean visitor centers can stay open and they won't have to be staffed by volunteers, Francis said. The shoulders of the 469-mile road will be mowed more in keeping with the parkway's design. Bathrooms will be clean.

"They'll make a big difference," Francis said. "It'll certainly look better than it has."

The parkway money comes as part of a presidential budget that requests \$258 million more for national parks than the system operates with now. Part of the proposal, the National Parks Centennial Initiative, would use \$100 million in federal money to match private donations to parks' operating funds.

The plan would add 3,000 seasonal workers systemwide. The parkway could get 47.

President and Laura Bush flew to Shenandoah National Park on Wednesday to promote the plan. Shenandoah, at the northern end of the Blue Ridge Parkway, would get an additional \$1.8 million under the proposal.

"Congress needs to hear loud and clear how important this initiative is," Bush said during the visit. "I hope the citizens groups who are concerned about the parks beat a hasty trail to the Congress and remind the Congress about what we have done and what we need to do as good stewards of the parks."

U.S. Rep. Rick Boucher, D-Abingdon, said the president should do more.

"While I welcome this increase, it still is not enough," Boucher said.

There are more funds for maintenance in the president's budget, but the parkway, one of nearly 400 national park units, has a maintenance backlog of more than \$200 million. That's nearly as much as the president's proposed budget increase for the entire park system.

"We need to spend the money that is required to maintain our national parks," Boucher said. "It should be a national priority. It's a much higher priority to me than some of the things this administration spends money on."

Private charity is a fine thing, the congressman said, but it's the federal government's responsibility to maintain the national park system. That's why, Boucher said, he will push for more funds for parks.

U.S. Rep. Bob Goodlatte, R-Roanoke, agreed that more needs to be done, but he described the president's budget proposal as a significant step in the right direction.

"We need to build on this," Goodlatte said. "There's a lot of ground that needs to be made up."

In addition to the maintenance backlog, the parkway has 57 of its 231 full-time jobs open as a way to cut costs.

That's 11 more empty jobs than the parkway had a year ago. Goodlatte said he hopes shifting new funds within the parkway budget can fill some of the jobs.

The open jobs include chief of maintenance, chief of concessions and chief of interpretation.

Filling all the empty jobs, according to the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation Web site, would cost about \$4 million.

Although most of the unfilled jobs were held by people who retired or transferred to other parks, Francis said, "We've actually let a couple of people go."

Finding a financial fix for the parkway and similar linear parks will be a challenge. Yellowstone, Yosemite and the Grand Canyon parks each generate more than \$4 million annually in entrance fees. There's no practical way to charge admission at each entrance along the parkway's two-state length, Goodlatte said. The federal government needs to find a different answer.

The president's plan aims to raise up to \$3 billion nationally over 10 years, leading up to the park system's centennial in 2016. Francis sees hope in that long-range approach, but looking back at the parkway's long-term trend isn't encouraging.

According to the parkway foundation, the parkway's budget, when adjusted for inflation, has increased a half percent over its 1980 budget. It fell 1 percent between 2002 and 2005.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.