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Cook Forest facilities are being closed

By RANDY BARTLEY Staff writer Sep 6, 2019

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Kevin Blair holds a handful of rust he scraped from inside one of the supporting I beams beneath the Tom's Run Bridge at C Forest State Park. The steel bridge crosses Tom's Run and is the main avenue to the old growth Forest Cathedral. The 67-ft long bridge was closed after an engineer's inspection, and the issue was "pocket rust." The bridge has reached the point the no longer structurally safe. (By Randy Bartley)

(Editor's note: This is the second of a four-part series about Pennsylvania's state parks and forests:)

COOKSBURG - One by one, the recreational facilities are being closed at Cook Forest State Park.

The steel bridges that cross Tom's Run, a tributary to the Clarion River, are being closed and a playground in a picnic area will be closed at the end of the year.

Park Manager Ryan Borcz recently told the board of directors of the Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation (PPFF) that one of the most popular bridges has been closed due to "pocket rust" that has destabilized the bridges. Steel footbridges exist up and down Tom's Run.

Three of the steel bridges have been taken out of service at Clear Creek State Park. Two are being replaced. Borcz said that within the next three to five years an additional six bridges would be closed. To minimize the environmental impact a helicopter was used to set the bridges. Preliminary replacement estimates are about \$80,000 to \$100,000 per bridge.

The Friends of the Forest have tried to raise funds to replace the bridge. "This is probably too large a project for them to accomplish," said Borcz.

The playground at Cook Forest will closed due to the condition of the wood and the recycled rubber fall material. The playground is about 35 years old, and replacing it will cost in excess of \$40,000.

At the Ridge campground, the entry road is a blacktop road "that is reverting back to dirt" and shower rooms that are 40 years old. The Ridge site has 200 campsites. Over the Labor Day weekend an estimated 800-1,000 people were at the campground.

"I just don't have funding for this right now," he said.

In Cook Forest about \$5.7 million is needed in infrastructure money said Marci Mowrey of PPFF.

The park receives 469,000 visitors per year. The economic impact of that visitation is over \$11 million dollars and it supports 11 jobs in the surrounding community. The park employs 15 full time staff, 14 seasonal staff and four security officers.

The Civilian Conservation Corps built Cook Forest and Clear Creek in the 1930s. The CCC built the 18 rustic cabins in Cook Forest.

Clear Creek has 22 rustic, CCC-era cabins. The CCC also built the dam at the park.

"No one would have thought these cabins would have lasted nearly 80 years," said Borcz. "We have managed to rehab them. Some of them have probably had three or four roofs. They are something that we are committed to maintaining here for as long as we possible can."

The park has received some improvements over the years. "The shower houses we have are "modern" but are over 40 years old.

"Sewage and water infrastructure is a big expense and it is not something we have available everywhere," said Borcz. "The pit latrine is still a very viable option in some parks."

The new park office is an example of investment in facilities.

"The old park office was in the flood plane of the Clarion River," said Borcz. "When the river flooded in 2014 we lost years of historical data and about \$25,000 worth of park equipment. What resulted almost immediately were mold spores."

Borcz said the planning stage to the completion of the new building took 11 years.

A problem that needs to be resolved is the parking area at the park's office. Borcz said the lot is often full and people will park in between the trees on the outer perimeter.

Borcz would like to remove the old park building and put restrooms and changing rooms in a new structure which would be built above the flood plane.

"Deferred maintenance is always a topic of discussion," said Borcz. "We have rehab needs all over the place."

Kevin Blair, the assistant regional manager for state parks in the Western Regional Office, said "From a regional standpoint we always compile a list on our needs and sewer, water and safety issues are at the top of the list. Once those needs are met we often don't have a lot left over for the visitor amenities.

"To the visiting public it may not seem like we are doing a lot but in reality we are doing what we have to do. Both the arks and forestry were hit with staff reductions several years ago," he said. "We are doing more and more with less and less every day."

The PPF lists the following needs at Clear Creek State Park: Riparian planting along Clarion River in campground to stabilize eroding shoreline, a tractor with bucket and loader, generator hookups at shower houses, rehab cabin facilities, a shutter cab tractor, an articulating boom lift, plant trees in the campground, addition to existing playground and rehab five sites in Hillside camping area.

At Cook Forest, the PPF lists the following needs: A mini excavator, a 10,000-pound trailer, rehab fire tower (paint, steelwork, roof and windows), deer enclosure in old growth area, replace Ridge Campground playground, rehab Indian and River cabins, trees at new park office and throughout park, three additional river cabins, repair and resurface trails park-wide, playground in Henrys Run day use area, an excavator and an articulating boom lift.

The PPF estimates the total dollar amount of Pennsylvania's state park and forest infrastructure projects is just over \$1 billion.

(Part three of this series will examine the needs of the Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry.)