Georgia opens first new state park in 18 years despite tight budget

By Ty Tagami and James Salzer
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The state opened its first new state park in 18 years on Friday, using volunteer labor and local support to overcome major budget cuts in park spending.

Just in time for the Fourth of July holiday, volunteers and others gathered at a new visitor center to celebrate the opening of Chattahoochee Bend State Park in western Coweta County.

It's Georgia's first new state park since Tallulah Gorge in 1993, and it might not have opened except for lucky timing, strong local support and the enthusiasm of people such as Archie Davis.

The retired Delta Air Lines mechanic is among dozens of volunteers who donated their time and energy to bring the 2,910-acre park to life. He was out there under the sizzling sun last Saturday, clearing brush from a trail.

Davis enjoys floating the Chattahoochee River in a canoe and said this park, which has seven miles of river frontage, is located between two established boat launches. Paddlers can land at the park's boat ramp and use the bathrooms and picnic areas or camp for the night. "It should get a lot of use," he said.

The land was acquired years before the recession, but it sat idle until local interest swelled.

"People in this community wanted this park so badly; it wouldn't be there without them," said Kim Hatcher, a spokeswoman for the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, which runs the park system.

Becky Kelley, DNR's director of parks, recreation and historic sites, said, "I think in this day and time, we are dependent on the local community and volunteers to help get us through. It is truly a vision of our future to be able to rely on this degree of support from the local community."

A crucial moment came about seven years ago when the county agreed to pay for plans to develop the land, said Dean Jackson, past president of a park support group, the Friends of Chattahoochee Bend State Park.

"We just got interested in it after it sat there for four or five years, and we asked the state Department of Natural Resources what it takes to develop a state park," said Jackson, who is the current chairman of the citizens board of the Coweta County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The response: create a development plan. That led to the next milestone: In 2006, before the recession started, state lawmakers approved borrowing $7 million to develop the park.

"So you're talking for several years before the Great Recession … you already had the investment in land and facilities out there," said Todd Holbrook, deputy DNR commissioner.

Since then, states have cut park spending, prioritizing other services such as education and health care. In May, for instance, California Gov. Jerry Brown announced plans to save money by closing up to 70 state parks.

In Georgia, funding for state parks has been cut 46 percent since 2008, said Todd Holbrook, deputy DNR commissioner. Agency officials said 169 people have been eliminated from the parks payroll. Funding for DNR will fall from $131 million in fiscal 2008 to a projected $89.7 million this year.

DNR has cut maintenance at parks and lakes, eliminated aquariums and reduced swimming pool hours at state facilities. No state parks have closed, but facilities within a few parks, like a lodge or cottage facilities, have closed and hours have been cut.

The new park, Holbrook said, will cost about $284,000 a year to run. It will have four or five full-time staffers, consistent with spending at similar parks. Sites throughout Georgia are relying more heavily on volunteers to do things like man kiosks, clean bathrooms and tidy up campsites.

Coweta County spent more than $1.2 million to build roads and parking in Chattahoochee Bend, Kelley said.

Beyond the budgets, there were the volunteers. Jackson said the Friends group cleared six miles of hiking trails. The group also installed small bridges and collected old tires, shattered glass and other junk. Dozens of volunteers have come out to Chattahoochee Bend -- named after the horseshoe curve of the river there -- one Saturday each month.

"There's been a huge amount of excitement the last couple of years about the park," Jackson said.

Last Saturday, Davis, the retired airline mechanic, spent several hours at the park working with other volunteers. His pickup truck bed was filled with tools -- a string trimmer, a brush cutter, a sling blade and an ax. He's volunteered at several state parks, but this is now a favorite since it's so close to his home in Fayetteville.

As he was packing up, several cars cruised through the parking lot. One driver, Curtis Abrahamson, said he'd been searching for directions online when he noticed the park on the map. The Newnan resident had never heard about it, so he drove over for a look.

Now he can be counted among the park's fans. He said he plans to camp there as soon as the weather cools.

"It's nice," he said. "They've done a really good job."

The park is aimed at paddlers and anglers, but hikers and campers will also find amenities, including huts, restrooms, camping platforms and a visitor center. For information and directions: www.gastateparks.org/ChattahoocheeBend.

The 10 largest state parks by visitation for the last fiscal year

GEORGIA VETERANS (Cordele) 752,558

*RED TOP MOUNTAIN (Cartersville) 721,956

HIGH FALLS (Jackson) 691,727

RICHARD B. RUSSELL (Elberton) 562,515

UNICOI (Helen) 560,218

AMICALOLA FALLS (Dawsonville) 458,153

TUGALOO (Lavonia) 401,715

*FORT YARGO (Winder) 382,061

*HARD LABOR CREEK (Rutledge) 379,542

TALLULAH GORGE (Tallulah Falls) 302,701

LITTLE OCMULGEE (Helena) 262,954

* State campgrounds within a couple hours drive of Atlanta. Also nearby: F.D. Roosevelt State Park, Indian Springs State Park and, now, Chattahoochee Bend.

Source: Georgia Department of Natural Resources

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