

Demolition, rebuilding project at Fall Creek Falls inn, restaurant starting in April

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NASHVILLE — Tennessee's Fall Creek Falls State Park's inn, restaurant and conference center are scheduled to close April 2, 2018, as Tennessee officials proceed with plans to demolish the structures and build a new facility in an estimated \$25 million project.

Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation officials last week met with employees to discuss the closure "and how it could impact them," department spokesman Eric Ward confirmed in an email.

"We felt it was important to have a meeting well in advance of the closure date," Ward said.

Work at the 26,000-acre resort-style park, located in Van Buren and Bledsoe counties in a remote area of the Upper Cumberland Plateau, is expected to take 1 1/2 to two years.

"The inn project is a critical long-term investment in Van Buren and Bledsoe counties that will prove to be a catalyst for economic growth and prosperity in what is currently a distressed rural region of the state," Ward said.

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He noted the project "is part of an overall plan of reinvestment in the park facilities that includes the cabins, pool, visitor center, village green, nature center, golf course, sewer upgrade and more."

The inn complex at the resort-style park is actually two structures. One dates back to the 1960s. Both will be demolished and an estimated 85-room facility built. Park cabins, the lodge and other facilities are expected to remain open.

With 31 full-time and another 27 "potentially" impacted part-time positions at stake, there have been concerns about the fate of workers in an economically distressed area as well as local government concerns about loss of tax revenue from inn and restaurant operations.

A number of state legislators as well as the Tennessee State Employees Association have voiced concern over the closure. Last month, State Building Commission officials closely questioned Environment and Conservation Commissioner Bob Martineau at length, making it clear they wanted TDEC officials to make the process as smooth as possible for impacted workers as well as local governments worried about loss of tax revenues from hospitality operations.

Van Buren County Mayor Greg Wilson did not respond to a request for comment.

Several state lawmakers, including Sen. Janice Bowling, R-Tullahoma, as well as the Tennessee State Employees Association argue the original inn could be renovated at lower cost and with less impact on jobs while the newer facility could remain open. But Martineau counters that the facilities are literally falling apart.

Ward said benefits for full-time hospitality staff will include a severance package consisting of a one-time lump sum payment of \$3,200.

In addition, impacted employees will receive college tuition assistance for two years at any state-funded college, university or technical school as well as potential state unemployment benefits.

The employees also will be placed on the state's Reduction in Force list for one year, making them eligible for consideration for employment in other areas of state government.

"Our human resources staff will be working closely to identify other positions at TDEC, at other state agencies and other employers in the area that might be available to those impacted employees," Ward said.

Part-time staff will receive a one-time lump sum payment of \$1,000, college tuition assistance for one year and potential state unemployment benefits.

Republican Gov. Bill Haslam in May threw in the towel on his plan to outsource park hospitality functions a second time at Fall Creek Falls after vendors twice showed no interest.

Martineau said the stated issue the second time were would-be vendors' concerns about added costs for asbestos removal and disposal at the original inn building.

The first rejection came during Haslam and TDEC officials' initial effort to outsource hospitality functions at Fall Creek Falls and other resort-style parks with similar amenities like golf courses and boating.

Buildings at the parks were in such sorry shape that for-profit companies told the state they wanted no part of operating them.

Future decisions on whether or not to pursue park hospitality outsourcing will be left to the governor's successor, Haslam reiterated last month, while also emphasizing the state must act now to address structural problems.

"I think the reason we decided to pull that back is because the reconstruction process was going to be done after we were gone," said Haslam, who leaves office in January 2019. "It wasn't fair for us to make that decision — we were going to be soliciting for someone to be operating two years from now. We're not going to be here. That didn't feel fair."

House Speaker Beth Harwell, R-Nashville, who is running for governor, has already gone on record in opposition to outsourcing hospitality functions at Fall Creek Falls and similar parks including Montgomery Bell and Paris Landing state parks in Middle Tennessee.

That issue aside, Haslam said the reconstruction work still must move forward.

"If we're going to be in the state park business, then we can't have facilities that nobody wants to come to," Haslam said. "And literally, we were years behind the time. ... They need to be facilities that we're proud of."

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