



2014 VACo Achievement Awards

Deadline: June 2, 2014

Application Form

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 2, 2014.**

Program Information

Locality Roanoke County

Program Title Explore Park

Program Category Parks & Recreation

Contact Information

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Signature of county administrator or chief administrative officer

Name B. Clayton Goodman III

Title County Administrator

Signature _____

SHORT OVERVIEW

In late 2013, Roanoke County officials negotiated a 99-year lease agreement with the Virginia Recreational Facilities Authority (VRFA) to take over the complete operation of Explore Park, a former living history attraction along the Blue Ridge Parkway. This bold move added 1,100 acres of recreational space to the County’s parks inventory, and secured the future of the facility for future economic development prospects. The County then put a plan in place to re-open the park at virtually no cost to taxpayers. Using existing staff, committees were formed to fulfill various tasks required to re-open the facility. Their efforts culminated in a public “Open House” event on June 10, 2014. The future of the park is now secure, and severing the recreation needs of Roanoke County residents.

EXPLORE PARK BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Located directly off the Blue Ridge Parkway at Milepost 115, Virginia’s Explore Park first opened in the early 1990’s as a living history museum focused on the frontier history of Southwest Virginia. The 1,100 acre park was operated by the Virginia Recreational Facilities Authority (VRFA), an independent state appointed entity chartered to create a regional attraction at the site that would preserve the local history and natural environment while boosting tourism. Due to a lack of funding, Explore Park shut its doors in 2007. Since that time, most of the park has been closed to the public with the exception of several trails and the Blue Ridge Parkway Visitor Center, which has continued to be staffed by Roanoke County. VRFA held onto the property with the hope that an economic development prospect could be brought to the site. However, by early 2013 it became clear that there were no investors willing to partner with the park due to its unstable future.

ROANOKE COUNTY ANNOUNCES A PLAN

Throughout the summer of 2013, Roanoke County Board of Supervisors Chairman Michael W. Altizer worked behind the scenes with County Administrator Clay Goodman and Parks, Recreation and Tourism Director Doug Blount to put together a plan to save and preserve the park. A press conference was held on August 29, 2013 to announce that an agreement in principle had been reached between the VRFA and Roanoke County to establish a 99-year lease at virtually no cost, whereby the park would be administered by Roanoke County’s Parks, Recreation and Tourism department, with the long term goal of creating a regional adventure park (APPENDIX A: PRESS CONFERENCE PACKET & APPENDIX B: ALTIZER

SPEECH). The media event generated a significant amount of buzz for the proposed project, and announced several dates for community input prior to adoption of the lease.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND LEASE ADOPTION

County citizens were engaged throughout the process as the board took up the final lease agreement at meetings throughout the month of September. Citizens within 5 miles of the park received two notices by mail about a town hall style community meeting prior to the vote (APPENDIX C: MEETING NOTICE). The meeting was held on Thursday, September 19 at 6:00 p.m., and consisted of brief speeches by local officials (APPENDIX D: BLOUNT SPEECH), followed by guided discussions at tables throughout the Visitor Center area. Citizens and interested stakeholders were encouraged to interact with Roanoke County staff and provide written suggestions about ways they would like to see the park developed (APPENDIX E: MEETING PICTURES, and APPENDIX F: CITIZEN SUGGESTIONS). Approximately 200 people attended the community meeting, and many others continued to submit suggestions over the next few weeks via an online portal on the County website. In a unanimous vote, the Roanoke County Board of Supervisors entered into the lease agreement (APPENDIX G: EXPLORE PARK LEASE) on September 27, 2013, officially taking over full operational control of the park at the cost of just \$1 per year for all 1,100 acres.

RESTORING THE PARK WITHOUT TAX DOLLARS

Explore Park was taken on by Roanoke County with a promise to citizens that it would not be a

tax burden. That means that the park will have to rely primarily on business partnerships or revenue generated at the facility for future improvements or staffing costs. As part of the lease agreement, the remaining VRFA budget of approximately \$100,000 was transferred to Roanoke County for infrastructure improvements at the site. From October 2013 to June 2014, the bulk of that funding has gone towards the restoration of two buildings, which will be used for revenue generation in the future. The historic Mountain Union Church (APPENDIX H: MOUNTAIN UNION) is being refurbished for wedding rentals, and the replica historic Arthur Taubman Center (APPENDIX I: TAUBMAN CENTER) is also being restored to use for public programming, summer camps and community rentals. These investments are already paying dividends, with several weddings and camp programs already scheduled for summer 2014. Outside of the normal operation of the Visitor Center, no additional staff were hired to manage Explore Park. Roanoke County Parks, Recreation and Tourism took a unique committee approach to the project, involving over 30 existing staff members. Staff were assigned to a maintenance committee, management committee, programming committee, and executive committee and tasked with a wide variety of projects needed to re-open the park (APPENDIX J: COMMITTEE PRESENTATION). Among the projects successfully accomplished over the 6-month period include:

- The re-opening of over 14 miles of walking and biking trails at the park
- Creation of a new logo and outdoor brand (APPENDIX K: OUTDOOR BRAND)
- Creation of a new map, brochure and directional signs (APPENDIX L: MAPS)
- Implementation and management of revenue generating recreation programs
- Re-tooling of Visitor Center and gift shop operations for greater cost recovery

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- Establishing standards for emergency response, programming, and events
 - Planning and execution of the a Spring 2014 Open House event

EXPLORE PARK PUBLIC UNVEILING AND OPEN HOUSE EVENT

Instead of a ceremonial ribbon cutting for the park, Roanoke County officials decided to unveil the new Explore Park to the public with a free special event on Saturday, May 10, 2014 from 10:00am to 5:00pm. This program was the culmination of months of effort and improvements to the park. Activities available at the event included music, storytelling, environmental education, family games, a sand sculpture, program demonstrations, and more (APPENDIX M: EVENT PROGRAM). Additionally, a charity 5K race and a large geocaching (GPS treasure hunt) activity were held in conjunction with the event. Despite stormy weather, the event drew over 1,000 visitors to experience the newly revitalized park (APPENDIX N: EVENT PICS).

IMPORTANCE OF THE PROJECT

Roanoke County’s bold move in agreeing to a long-term lease to manage Explore Park was a sound investment in the future recreation needs of our citizens and the region at large. In summary, Explore Park will provide long-term value for the community in the following ways:

- 1) **Outdoor Tourism** – In recent years, the Roanoke region has begun to focus on outdoor recreation as a catalyst for tourism and economic growth. Roanoke County is well positioned to take advantage of natural amenities like Explore Park as the region works to build this brand. The County already sees many visitors from the Blue Ridge Parkway

and Appalachian Trail .The Roanoke Valley Convention and Visitors Bureau is in the early stages of a large nationwide marketing push to make the area well known for these amenities. Explore Park is well positioned to play a large role in the region’s success as an outdoor recreation destination. The park presents opportunities for rental cabins, camping, RV parking, a ropes course, and various other forms of eco-tourism.

2) Fulfilling A Community Vision – In 2007, Roanoke County Parks, Recreation and Tourism conducted a master plan survey and facility needs assessment. Among the highest needs cited by our citizens were greenways for walking and biking, nature trails and a nature center. The survey also found our parks system deficient 377 acres of park land based on population size. The adoption of Explore Park as a passive recreation space fulfills that vision. Since the survey was carried out, Roanoke County has progressively tackled a long list of community recreation needs through infrastructure development, such as the opening of the popular Green Ridge Recreation Center in 2010. Explore Park serves as the final piece of the puzzle, allowing the County to fulfill nearly all of the assessment’s recommendations. New master plans for both the department and Explore Park are tentatively slated for early 2015.

3) Low Cost Investment – With the lease of the property, Roanoke County citizens received over 1,100 acres of land, and a large amount of existing infrastructure at virtually no cost. A typical land acquisition of this size could cost millions of dollars. The County was already spending \$52,000 annually to manage the Blue Ridge Parkway Visitor Center within the park. That existing funding will remain in place for Explore Park, and no additional tax revenue will be needed to continue operating the facility.

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- 4) **Stability and Economic Development** – A secure future for Explore Park will increase the chances of a suitable business partner being interested in development at the facility. Roanoke County’s Economic Development Department has already held preliminary meetings with several interested businesses considering development at Explore Park. The terms of Roanoke County’s lease of the facility allow for a wide range of development, sub-leasing, and revenue generating opportunity.
- 5) **Environmental Preservation, Greenways & Blueways**– Explore Park preserves several miles of Roanoke River frontage at one of the most beautiful natural areas in the region. Roanoke County’s new lease agreement guarantees that a full generation of Roanoke County citizens will have fishing and paddling access to the picturesque Roanoke River gorge. The lease agreement also serves as a future path for the Roanoke River Greenway, a multi-jurisdictional effort now underway that when complete will connect a 26 mile stretch of the region with a paved walking and biking path. Finally, a new initiative was begun this spring to create a designated Blueway for watercraft traffic on the Roanoke River, which will be well served by the addition of portage and camping amenities at Explore Park.

Roanoke County’s new Explore Park is well positioned to become a leader in providing outdoor recreation opportunities, while preserving the region’s natural and historical legacy. Through the 99-year lease of the property, Roanoke County has created a prime economic development opportunity while preserving a valuable outdoor recreation space for future generations.