

Briefing Statement

Bureau: National Park Service

Issue: Interim Visitor Center Plan

Park Site: Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument

Date: April 18, 2006 (Update)

Background: The battlefield became a part of the National Park system on July 1, 1940. Twelve years later, a visitor center was constructed southeast of Last Stand Hill. Later additional office spaces were added to the original floor plan. In subsequent years, internal and external modifications were made to the structure to meet changing needs and to comply with safety and health regulations. Today, the visitor center is open most of the year, and annual visitation has increased to approximately 400,000 visitors. In contrast, the annual visitation was 100,000 in 1952. The existing facility is inadequate to address current interpretative needs, museum displays and collections, and visitor services.

Park visitors currently gather underneath a fiberglass overhang that is attached to the observation room. This roof overhang helps to provide shade on hot sunny days. Visitors must endure high winds and other weather phenomena along with noise and air pollution associated with the main park road that is less than 65-70 feet from this location. During the summer season up to 200 visitors try to crowd into this small space to observe one of 13 daily interpretive presentations. Existing conditions are so crowded that visitors are unable to obtain the full story.

The park film is shown in a converted storage room in the basement of the visitor center accessed via an exterior stairway. The stairs leading down into this room are uneven and there is a false landing at the base that causes visitors to trip. The 45 seat audio visual room cannot provide proper ventilation nor accommodate the volume of current daily visitation during the summer months. For these reasons, the audio visual room is only available in the spring and fall during nice weather. A project is being proposed to modify these existing conditions and to provide a quality NPS experience that is safe and accessible to all visitors. The proposal, converts the existing observation room and outside patio within the visitor center into an all season multi-purpose room.

The 1986 General Management Plan (GMP), revised in 1995, calls for a substantial expansion of the boundaries of the Monument and for the construction of a new larger visitor center and other facilities. This project is an interim solution to address immediate problems and is not intended to disrupt the momentum of meeting the goals established in the GMP. As part of the National Environmental Policy Act process, an environmental assessment (EA) is being prepared for this interim project, to identify issues, areas requiring additional study, and topics that will be analyzed in the EA.

Current Status:

- In 1997, a Visitor Center Design Plan was proposed to improve visitor service, interpretation, museum collections, storage, and displays.
- A project request to remodel and enclose the interpretive area, theater, and museum utilizing 80% fee demo monies collected at the National Monument is currently under review.
- Doug Scott, Park Service Archeologist, completed an archeological resources inventory in 2004 and the results were submitted to the Montana State Historic Preservation Office.
- The Monument contracted preliminary design work to determine initial feasibility and cost estimates for budgeting purposes.
- An internal scoping meeting was conducted with park and regional office staff to discuss project issues, procedures, and identify possible impacts.
- On June 24, 2005 a presentation was made to the Custer Battlefield Historic Museum Association and others that described the proposed project.
- The project is generating some interest, both pro and con, from visitors, local newspapers and special interest groups because GMP goals have not been met and visitor services remain deficient.

- Public Scoping Meeting took place on December 20, 2005 at Little Bighorn Battlefield Visitor Center for the proposed interim visitor center plan.
- An Environmental Assessment (EA) is being written to include comments received from the scoping brochures and during the Open House. These comments will be compiled, analyzed and addressed through the EA process.
- The draft Environmental Assessment may be available for review and public comment by June 2006.
- A Determination of Eligibility for the visitor center was submitted to the Montana Historic Preservation Office. The Monument has determined the building not eligible to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the Montana SHPO has concurred.

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