

# ADVENTURE PLAN

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# ROANOKE COUNTY'S

# EXPLORE PARK



ROANOKE  COUNTY  
VIRGINIA EST. 1838



ROANOKE COUNTY PARKS, RECREATION AND TOURISM  
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# EXPLORE PARK PHASING REPORT



PHASING REPORT  
ROANOKE COUNTY PARKS, RECREATION AND TOURISM



Roanoke Explore Park  
Landscape Inventory and Special Places Project

Explore Park Business Plan  
June 2016



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ADVENTURE PLAN

ROANOKE COUNTY PARKS, RECREATION AND TOURISM



## WHAT'S INCLUDED?

- **Explore Park Adventure Plan** - Guided by extensive public input from interested citizens and stakeholder groups, this document outlines the long-term strategy for the park. It includes recommended amenities, maps, circulation and recommendations for implementation.
- **Explore Park Business Plan** - This comprehensive action plan contains recommendations for funding, staffing, management practices and other helpful tools based on a study of similar recreation attractions nationwide.
- **Explore Park Phasing Report** - A tentative timeline to guide the planning, design and construction of amenities within the park over the next 20 years.
- **Special Places Report** - Prepared by nationally known naturalist Michael Gaige, this document tells the cultural, environmental, and geological story of Explore Park to guide educational interpretation and preservation strategies as the park is developed.

## BUSINESS STRATEGY

Roanoke County has a proven track record of operating recreation facilities and programs with a high cost recovery. At Explore Park, our goal is to cover all operating expenses through program and user fees as well as sublease and rental agreements.

Whenever possible the County will seek out private businesses to build and manage the park's larger amenities. To construct and maintain lower-cost amenities, Roanoke County will partner with community advocates for fundraising and to seek grant opportunities.

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# YOUR DESTINATION FOR EXPLORATION



## OUR VISION

We envision Explore Park as the starting place for individuals and families seeking adventure and enrichment in the outdoors. Our focus will be expanding recreation opportunities such as hiking/biking trails, river access, overnight camping and educational programs based on the park's unique environmental and cultural history - all while preserving the park's natural beauty.

Roanoke County will rely heavily on business and community partnerships to build out the park over the next 20 years. The adventure plan includes a business and phasing plan to guide this effort.

The Blue Ridge Parkway is already a gateway for many visitors to our region. Few places on the East Coast offer such rich outdoor recreation amenities in such close proximity to a metropolitan core. We envision Explore Park as a must-see stop for our guests, inviting them to explore the rest of Virginia's Blue Ridge while they're here.



## HOW WE GOT HERE

- 1985 – Explore Park is chartered by the Virginia General Assembly as a state park administered by the Virginia Recreational Facilities Authority (VRFA), in partnership with The River Foundation as a fundraising organization. Land acquisition begins.
- 1987 – The River Foundation creates the park's first master plan, a 114 page document proposing \$349 million in development over nearly 30 years. The plan includes a large zoo, 11-story luxury hotel and frontier village.
- 1991 – Construction begins on historical buildings, continuing through 2002.
- 1994 – Explore Park opens to the public as a living history museum.
- 2001 – Commonwealth of Virginia reduces the park's annual appropriation.
- 2005 – VRFA enters a lease option agreement with Virginia Living Histories.
- 2008 – Explore Park closes as a living history museum, leaving only the Visitor Center open for public use, staffed by Roanoke County.
- 2009 – Virginia Living Histories introduces plans for Blue Ridge America, a \$200 million upscale resort.
- 2010 – Funding can't be secured for the project, and the relationship between VRFA and Virginia Living Histories company is severed.
- 2013 – VRFA agrees to a 99-year lease with Roanoke County to operate and develop the facility.
- 2014 – Roanoke County re-opens 14 miles of trails and river access through management of Explore Park as a passive recreation facility.
- 2016 – Roanoke County completes a master plan for Explore Park, with the goal of creating an adventure recreation attraction. This master plan document is the first in the park's history to include a business plan and outlined strategy for implementation.

# KEY AMENITIES

The map available at [www.ExplorePark.org/AdventurePlan](http://www.ExplorePark.org/AdventurePlan) identifies a wide range of proposed recreational amenities called for in the Adventure Plan. A few of the key items are defined below:

- **In-River Kayak Park** - Go tubing, kayaking or canoeing through a series of natural rapids, enhanced by in-river features that can be modified depending on water levels! This amenity would be the first of its kind in Virginia.
- **Roanoke River Greenway** - Imagine being able to walk or bike from downtown Roanoke all the way to Explore Park in an afternoon. When complete over the next few years, the Roanoke River Greenway will stretch 26 miles from Roanoke County's Green Hill Park in the west to Explore Park.
- **Overnight Accommodations** - The master plan calls for a variety of accommodations, built and managed by an outside vendor. Space has been designated for hike-in tent camping, car camping, cabins or yurts, RV camping, and a lodge. These are all much needed amenities that fit well into the region's tourism plan.
- **Food/Retail Operations** - The Brugh Tavern is available for a distillery, brewery or restaurant operation. Space has also been designated for a gas station and country store that will service the park's new visitors and overnight campers.
- **Zip-line / Aerial Park** - Ranking as one of the top attraction requests on our public survey, Explore Park is well positioned for an outside vendor to build a course. The park features diverse terrain, a river crossing opportunity and Blue Ridge Parkway access.
- **Bike Skills Park** - The Roanoke Region is on its way to becoming nationally recognized for bike amenities. Working closely with biking advocates and the Roanoke Chapter of the International Mountain Bike Association, we'll be seeking grant and fundraising opportunities to develop a world-class skills park. Located within the park's core, this amenity will also preserve a pristine natural environment for all to enjoy.
- **Disc Golf Course** - The hills, valleys and stunning vistas within Mayflower Hills Park provide the perfect backdrop for an 18 hole disc golf course currently in development. Future rest room and pavilion facilities will also be developed here. The course will be able to host regional tournaments.
- **Event Venues** - Enhancement of the road system will enable the Riverside Village Area (formerly historic area) to host special events. We envision the transformation of Houtz Barn into an event stage. In later years of development, the master plan calls for a concert stage on a picturesque field located on the Bedford County side of the park.
- **River Access** - The master plan calls for preservation of our 3-miles of Roanoke River frontage, as well as increased public access for recreation such as boating and fishing. These efforts go hand-in-hand with the regional development of a blueway system throughout the valley.
- **Equipment Rental** - With improved river access will come the need for rental equipment such as kayaks, canoes, tubes and fishing gear. An outside vendor will build and operate this amenity.

# PROGRAMS

## SPECIAL EVENTS

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With a location along the Blue Ridge Parkway and ample parking, Explore Park is well positioned for events such as weddings, cultural arts shows, music festivals and trail racing or biking. Since Roanoke County re-opened the park in 2014, we've increased the number and quality of events every year. As additional infrastructure and amenities are developed at the park, new and unique venues and opportunities will be created.



## INTERPRETIVE PROGRAMS

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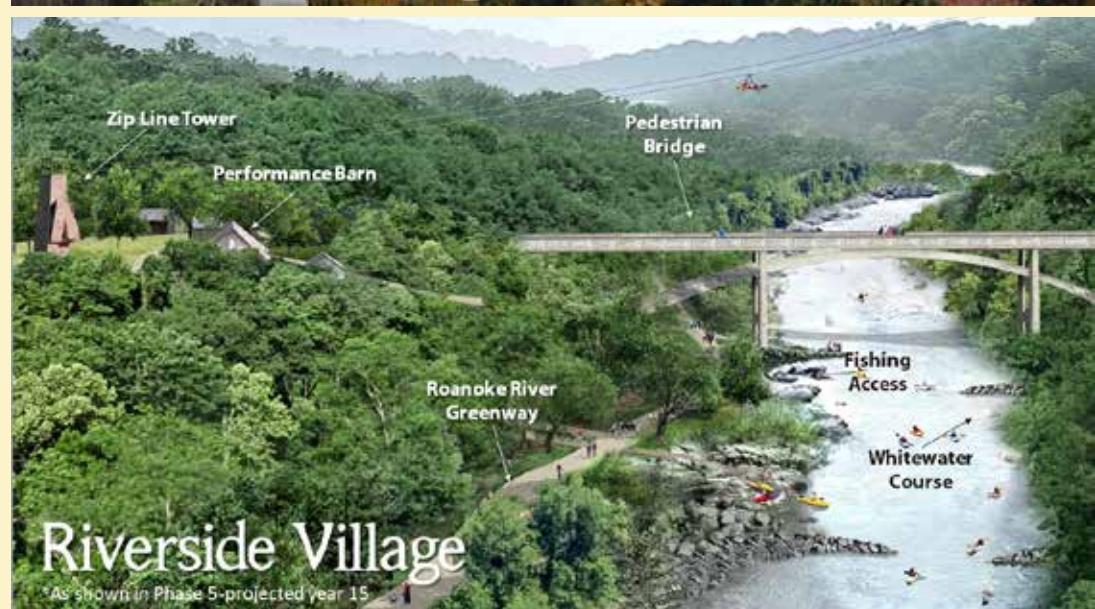
*"Rarely does such a combination of high-quality forests, a large river, rugged terrain, and a legacy of settlement and history come together as a large recreation space near an urban area."*

Naturalist Michael Gaige opens his special places inventory report with those words, which hint at the unique educational opportunities available at Explore Park. Staff is developing both live interpretive programs with a naturalist, as well as a digital interpretive program that will be available to guests at any time. We envision year round nature education that changes with the seasons.

## OUTDOOR UNIVERSITY

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Roanoke County Parks, Recreation and Tourism already has a positive reputation as one of the area's leading providers of recreation activities for youth and adults. Over the next few years, we plan to expand our program lineup to include a structured curriculum that introduces beginners to various forms of outdoor recreation. We will seek out community and educational partners to formalize recreation tracks and further develop these programs.



The conceptual renderings shown above represent a snapshot of the Explore Park Adventure Plan at various phases throughout the project. All amenities are contingent on private or community partnerships and funding availability.

