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Intermountain Region News Release

National Park Service abandons Visitor Center Expansion at Little Bighorn Battlefield

The National Park Service announced today that it will not move forward with the proposed expansion of the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument visitor center, but will instead study how to improve services to visitors without expanding the visitor center.

“Sometimes you just have to admit that you didn’t do your homework as well as you might have thought,” said Mike Snyder, Regional Director, Intermountain Region. “We’ve concluded that is really the case here. The proposal to expand the visitor center was one way to solve the problem of crowding during interpretive talks and the lack of a great room or theater to view the park’s film. But, after regional office staff reviewed the issues, we’ve concluded there are other ways that we can achieve those goals without encroaching further onto the battlefield,” Snyder said.

The visitor center project was driven by a need to address long-standing problems that negatively impacted the visitor experience at the battlefield. During high visitation periods, visitors cannot comfortably listen to interpretive talks given on the building’s patio because the patio is not large enough to accommodate the crowds. The park’s film, which tells the story of the battle, was screened in a basement room that is not accessible to people with mobility impairments and which lacks adequate exits.

“These are problems that we expected to be resolved with the construction of an off-site visitor center,” said Snyder. “The 1986 General Management Plan called for that to occur, but so far, the obstacles to achieving that have been insurmountable. In the meantime, park employees have struggled mightily to provide a quality visitor experience with inferior facilities,” Snyder continued. “To his credit, former superintendent Darryl Cook said ‘enough is enough’ and sought to improve the situation with the proposal to expand the visitor center. Resolving these conditions remains a top priority, but we think it can be accomplished without the significant expansion studied in the Environmental Assessment.”

The proposed expansion was the subject of a June 2006 Environmental Assessment and subsequent Finding of No Significant Impact signed by Snyder. A recent lawsuit by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility challenged the legal adequacy of those documents. As a result of today’s decision to abandon the expansion project, the National Park Service will withdraw the Finding of No Significant Impact it issued for the visitor center project in April 2008.

In the coming weeks, Intermountain Region specialists in interpretation and safety will work with battlefield staff in developing other approaches to providing the film and interpretive talks to park visitors. If the need exists, the National Park Service may consider interior changes to the building that do not alter the exterior walls, but will do so only after engaging in public participation and environmental compliance.

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