

Tallahassee Democrat.

NEWS

State seeking ideas for expanded Natural Bridge Battlefield State Park

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NATURAL BRIDGE – Close to 2,000 acres of land – dotted with pristine springs and covered by thick old-growth North Florida forest – is the next acquisition that brings the state one step closer to connecting Tallahassee to the Gulf Coast.

The Horn Springs addition, bought by the state in 2016, will increase the size of Natural Bridge Battlefield Historic State Park nine-fold and encapsulate a large portion of the upper St. Marks River.

Just 15 miles south of the capital city, it also would create a green space that stretches from J.R. Alford Greenway in Tallahassee nearly all the way south through to the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, save for a few acres of private land near the Jefferson County border.

Wedged between old timberland and rural southern Leon County, it's an area still wild with at least 10 major springs, dramatic karst topography, basin swamps and bottomland forests. It's also home to black bears and bald eagles.

The land and the watershed was at one point a popular spot for Tallahassee high schoolers despite being locked on private land, said Sean McGlynn of the Wakulla Springs Alliance. He said the acquisition is a long time in the making and a worthwhile public investment.

“It's just a fantasy of little springs. They even come up on the middle of the river,” McGlynn said. “It's a place that's going to bring people to the area, make us happy to live here and be a place for us to recreate with our kids. It's been private for too long.”

The purpose of the Horn Spring acquisition, according to the state, is to protect Florida's biodiversity of species, its natural community and landscape.

"The Horn Springs Addition is a critical component of a planned wildlife corridor along the St. Marks River and will protect regional water resources, cultural resources, and increase public recreation and education opportunities," wrote the Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Recreation and Parks in a 132-page report published this month.

The Division of Recreation and Parks is looking at how best to allow the public access to the land, which was bought from the Natural Bridge Timberlands company with \$16 million in Florida Forever funding. The state held a forum Wednesday to take public input on how best to manage the land.

The state has \$1.31 million to make improvements, build new structures housing modern amenities, complete hydrological, flora and fauna surveys and document all archeologically significant portions of the land.

Also included in the plan are six miles of trails south to Natural Bridge State Park, a canoe and kayak paddling trail leading to the area where the St. Marks River dips underground, access to Horn Springs and a scenic vista at Rock Bluff overlook where state officials are proposing a campground and day-use area with picnic spots and modern amenities.

Mike Riffle attended a meeting in December asking the public what they would like to see on the property. He is an avid outdoorsman, hiker and amateur photographer who has been scouring North Florida for ways to marry the three passions.

"It's a beautiful, beautiful piece of land," he said. "If you like that kind of land, the Horn Springs area is beautiful."

Riffle has become a regular volunteer at Natural Bridge Historic Battlefield State Park, site of the 1865 Battle of Natural Bridge, the second largest Civil War battle fought in Florida. Riffle tries to make it there at least once a month to pick up trash and help in any way he can.

The Horn Springs area and surrounding St. Marks River floodplain holds some of the treasures of the area, he said.

"Who knows how long we'll have these pristine springs in Florida because a lot of them are degrading in some ways," he said. "The springs over here are still among the most pristine in our state. It's something that the state should absolutely protect. The Florida Forever funds spent on that land were worth every penny."

For more information on the project visit https://floridadep.gov/sites/default/files/7%20-%20HornSpring_AGDraft072318.pdf

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