

Siting of the new Michaux State Forest Resource Management Center (RMC)

This document summarizes information that led to DCNR's decision to repurpose the 47-acres of Michaux State Forest currently leased to South Mountain Golf Course, LLC (lessee) as the site for the new RMC.

Background

Increased visitation is creating a high degree of demand on every acre of Michaux State Forest. Over time District managers have become more aware that continued use of the site as a golf course may not be the best option for operations and visitor use opportunities. Increased visitation brings an increase in expectations and the need for improved signage, comfort facilities, and interpretive resources. Additional factors drawing attention to the area include:

- Increasing discovery and visitation at Pulpit Rock, site of the most iconic photograph taken of Dr. Joseph T Rothrock, recognized as the "Father of Forestry" in Pennsylvania, found a short hike upslope from the course
- The density of other high-value historic sites found within day-hike trail connections to the golf course site; tent hospital site and the South Mountain sanatorium, Meeting of the Pines Natural Area, White Rocks vista and climbing area, Snowy Mountain Fire Tower and vista, a revolutionary war cemetery, and the Ralph Brock Seed Tree Nursery
- The potential for creating an alternate day use site to help relieve congestion at other Michaux destination sites
- The potential for restoring critical wildlife habitat that is becoming vital to the survival of a number of species in the South Mountain ecoregion
- Increasing likelihood that funding for an RMC would be prioritized near the end of the 10-year lease period

Timeline

When the last 10-year lease period was up for renewal in 2015, Michaux State Forest district managers communicated to the lessee that there was a high likelihood this would be the final agreement and the lease would not be renewed in 2025.

In the fall of 2016, staff were tasked with evaluating possible sites for a new RMC. A total of 9 sites within a 5-mile radius of the current office (which was also considered as a possible site) were evaluated on the same criteria:

- Proximity to Utilities
- Cost of Construction
- Avoidance of Ecological Conflicts (wetlands, critical habitat for protected species)
- Administrative and Operational Efficiency
- Ease of Public Access
- Visitation and Public Engagement Opportunities

After initial evaluation, the list of sites was reduced to two for further consideration; the DCNR owned site leased to the South Mountain Golf Course, LLC and the Department of General Services (DGS) owned site most recently under lease to the non-profit organization Vision Quest. After touring both sites with Bureau of Forestry leadership and Bureau of Facility Design and Construction (FDC) engineers, the golf course site was prioritized as the best option.

In January 2022, District managers met with the lessee and informed them of the District's decision to recommend the lease not be renewed and stated they would be willing to discuss this decision with family members, investors, and golf club members and would seek to facilitate direct engagement with the higher-level decision-makers within the Bureau of Forestry and DCNR, and the names of individuals they could reach out to were provided.

In late August 2023, District managers met with the lessee to notify them of DCNR's approval of the District's recommendation and in late September 2023 provided them with the Site Evaluation and Selection Report detailing the information that led to this decision and again offered to meet with their family members, investors, and golf club members to answer any questions before the decision to not renew the lease needed to be made public.

Commonly Asked Questions

Why does the District need a new office?

The current district office does not adequately accommodate the increasing number of visitors or optimally provide public service benefits. The office is outdated and does not meet the needs of staff in terms of office space, storage capacity, operations, and logistics.

Why were potential sites limited to a 5-mile radius of the current office? There are over 85,000 acres in the Michaux!

In terms of logistical, financial, and ecological efficiency, retaining a presence within this radius was necessary. Core maintenance operations will continue to base out of the current office location, additionally justifying the need to remain within a certain radius.

Why was the South Mountain Golf Course site chosen?

The golf course site was optimal based on its proximity to high-value visitation sites like the Snowy Mountain Fire Tower, Pulpit Rock, Meeting of the Pines Natural Area, and White Rocks Climbing Area; these are all areas with increasing visitation and discovery and there is a need for both staff and volunteer presence to enhance stewardship and protect these resources. There is the potential for trail connectivity to these sites and opportunities for beginner level short and mid-length loop trail systems, creating opportunities for education and visitor engagement while providing an alternate day use area to help relieve congestion at other destination sites within Michaux. The site is easily accessed by the public, already disturbed, and multiple potential sites for the building footprint are possible with options to expand in the future if needed. No ecological conflicts with protected species are known and restoration of wetland and savannah meadow habitat is possible on acres not required for the project. Locating the RMC here reduces overlap with amenities provided at nearby state parks (Caledonia, Pine Grove Furnace, King's Gap) and increases overall coverage for emergency response, particularly in the southern area of the state forest.

Why not choose the Vision Quest site?

While there are many reasons the Vision Quest site was up for possible selection, such as its proximity to utilities and being a previously disturbed site, there are also many reasons that make it a less desirable site. The site has limited opportunity for connectivity to trails or high-value visitation sites and access is more problematic due to a blind curve on PA Route 233. Options for placing the building footprint are limited and there would be no room for expansion given the site topography and how the site is pinched between the Appalachian Trail (AT), gas line, and PA Route 233. Additional challenges include maintaining the required buffer to the AT, the gas company Right-of-Way through the site, and the need to acquire ownership of the property from DGS. The site would require significant excavation leading to the potential for ecological impacts including conflict with timber rattlesnake (a protected species on South Mountain) hibernacula and adjacent wetlands.

What about the history of the site?

There are several historic features within proximity to the golf course site and the District acknowledges this includes the history of the golf course itself, which will remain part of the story told at the RMC. This meeting offers the opportunity for input on how the area's history could be honored. The RMC will make it possible for these sites to be more accessible to all visitors to the state forest and will provide both a central point of access and interpretive resources for those interested in learning more about these sites and the role of this historic forest and region.

When does the South Mountain Golf Course lease period officially end?

The lease has been reviewed by DCNR's legal counsel and it has been confirmed the lease period ends December 31, 2025. We are legally required to give the lessee 90 days' notice, but have chosen to notify the lessee, the membership, and the community in advance of that timeframe to give interested parties time to give input on how to share the history of the site in the new RMC or other ideas they might like to see taken into consideration during the design phase.