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# Opinion: Transformation of Raleigh's Dorothea Dix Mental Hospital sets benchmark for Chattanooga's Moccasin Bend

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by [Clint Cooper](#)

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File Photo By Clint Cooper / Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute, center, stands in the way of the use of the tip of the peninsula as part of the Moccasin Bend Archeological District.

We wouldn't categorize it as an apples-to-apples comparison, but a city in North Carolina has shown the way in transforming a state mental hospital with a cultural history into a spacious park.

That's what supporters of the Moccasin Bend National Archeological District are hoping can happen with the Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute — that it move off the land it has occupied since 1961 and that the national park that adjoins it be allowed to assume the land promised since legislation for the district was signed more than 20 years ago.

Dorothea Dix Park, a 308-acre park two miles southwest of downtown Raleigh, North Carolina, once was part of a 2,343-acre mental health hospital campus that contained 282 buildings and housed more than 2,700 patients. Most of its patients were relocated to Central Regional Hospital in Butner, North Carolina,

in 2000, and the hospital closed in 2012. The City of Raleigh purchased the land from the state of North Carolina in 2015, with proceeds to "fund facilities and services for the mentally ill," and opened it as a public park.

Several factors, according to North Carolina Health News, caused the hospital to close. Among them were general decay in its physical plant, more expense for upkeep and the general premise that people with mental illness would be better served in newer facilities or in the community, all factors extant at Moccasin Bend.

### Opinion: North Carolina park an example for Moccasin Bend



Here, then-Gov. Bill Haslam said in 2011 there were "no plans right now" to close Moccasin Bend, but he couldn't "say that 10 years from now that won't happen." Since then, the hospital has received somewhat of a reprieve and more than \$250 million in state funds to replace its facilities, on the same site or elsewhere.

Tennessee Mental Health and Substance Abuse Commissioner Marie Williams said last fall that remaining and rebuilding on a 13-acre site on the peninsula, as opposed to moving elsewhere, would be the best choice for the hospital. Park supporters adamantly disagree and believe the hospital staying on Moccasin

Bend not only violates "verbal commitments" made when the archeological district was created but keeps several more generations from experiencing all the rich cultural history the land has to offer.

Dorothea Dix, according to various online histories, came to North Carolina in 1848 and called for reform in the care of mentally ill patients. After the formation of the North Carolina State Medical Society a year later, an institution in the state capital of Raleigh was planned and opened in 1856. It was named Dix Hill, in honor of the grandfather of Dix, and renamed in her honor nearly 100 years later.

Once the park was purchased by Raleigh, its long-term development was planned, with 65,000 community members sharing their ideas about how it should be used. Since then, a play plaza with fountains, gardens and a picnic area has opened, as well as a dog park. It also hosts a wide variety of events from yoga to birdwatching to artist talks. The city also recognizes the park site as broad contemporary indigenous land of the Coharie, Cherokee, Haliwa-Saponi, Lumbee, Meherrin, Occaneechi, Sappony and Waccamaw-Siouan.

Similar community input was involved in the National Park Service's 2015 general management plan for the 956-acre Moccasin Bend park, and groundbreaking for the long-awaited visitors center is planned for this fall. Future plans for the park include activities that will play upon the unmatched history of the area from ancient Indian occupation to the Trail of Tears to the Civil War and beyond.

The difference in the parks is the vision for them by the two states. North Carolina sold its property to Raleigh because it could conceive what the park could do for the city. Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee, Commissioner Williams and the county legislative delegation have yet to be convinced of that for Chattanooga and Hamilton County.

"People don't know what they don't know" is the way former U.S. Rep. Zach Wamp, who engineered the creation of the archeological district through Congress 20 years ago, put it to supporters of the park at a recent gathering.

"They knew very little [about the history of the district]. And "we did not do a good enough job with our [county] delegation."

Now, he said, "we have to be of a common mind and purpose" in preventing a "tragic mistake" and in convincing them of the efficacy of moving the hospital.

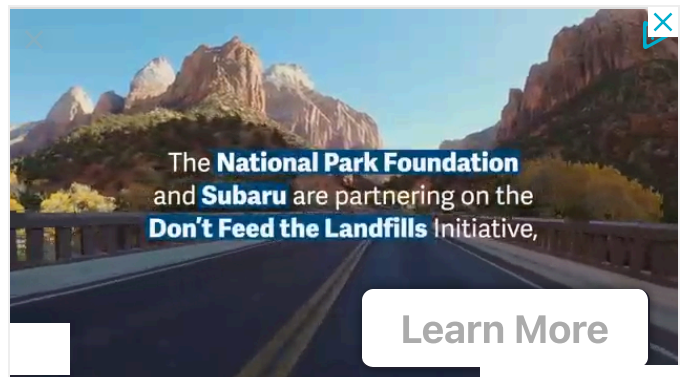
Scott Martin, administrator of Chattanooga Parks and Outdoors, was more direct.

"Economically and morally," he said, the park and what it offers in that specific location will shape the future trajectory of the city "more than any mental hospital."

Of course, it's not a matter of not having both, as National Park Partners Executive Director Tricia Mims explained.

"We're opposed to nonconforming use facilities," she said, "but we support investment in a new [mental health] hospital."

We hope in time — a short time, to be sure — Tennessee officials will come to see in Moccasin Bend what North Carolina officials saw in Dorothea Dix Park.



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