

Modernizing the state's oldest park



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Chad and Julie Theule brought their family from San Luis Obispo to see the redwoods in Big Basin Redwoods State Park. They are staying at Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park in Felton, and made a day trip to Big Basin.

NEW PLAN ENVISIONS VISITOR CENTER, LODGE, BIKING TRAILS

Big Basin

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BOULDER CREEK

Big Basin Redwoods, California's oldest state park with its rustic outpost of cabins and campsites deep in the Santa Cruz Mountains, appears a world frozen in time.

After more than a century of stasis, however, the ageless attraction may be on the verge of change.

From new, modern lodging to expanded mountain-biking trails, state planners have begun considering what the 108-year-old park should look like in its next century.

"We're kind of stepping outside the box to see what people would be interested in," said Dave Keck, project manager for the coming Big Basin General Plan. "We're not trying to develop attractions that will bring more visitors as much as we're trying to provide accommodations for those who are using the park now."

Big Basin, best known for its 300-foot-tall trees, once drew vacationing families by train and coach to the cool, old-growth forests for the summer. Today, the park attracts tourists and locals year-round, both seeking a glimpse of the majestic redwood stands as well as enjoying the trails, beaches and mountain peaks offered within the 18,000-

acre wilderness.

"I've been to California before, but only Southern California," said Christine Garcia, who was recently visiting from Houston and walked the park's famous redwood loop trail. "This is exactly what I envisioned when I thought about Northern California. It's pretty incredible."

FUTURE PLANS

State planners are adamant that any changes at Big Basin will be made with the protection of the redwoods in mind. In fact, one of the fundamental moves being considered would reduce automobile traffic, and hence the environmental nuisance, at



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Derrick Morris and wife Stephanie stroll through Big Basin state park's Campfire Center, where storytelling around a bonfire happens each night with amphitheater seating carved from redwood logs.



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Big Basin's visitors center has the homey feel of a comfortable lodge.

BIG BASIN

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the main redwood grove at the park headquarters.

The proposal calls for moving many visitor services and perhaps even building a new welcome center three miles east of the park headquarters at Saddle Mountain on Highway 236 — where nonprofit Sempervirens Fund now operates an environmental school. New parking lots would be sited here and a bus would shuttle visitors to and from the main redwood stand.

"It'd be nice to thin out the traffic at the (headquarters) area," said Karl Tallman, the chief ranger for several parks in the Santa Cruz Mountains, including Big Basin. "On Saturdays and Sundays, on nice days, there are so many cars parked or idling here. It takes away from the aesthetic."

The historic lodge, visitor center and homes now at the park headquarters would be renovated, in keeping with tradition, but won't likely be expanded, planners said.

Not far from Saddle Mountain, off of Highway 236, is an area where most of the new development, should it be approved, would proceed. The so-called Little Basin property, 534 wooded acres that are being conveyed to the state from a private landowner, would be opened to the public for camping while an overnight lodge and restaurant eventually may be built here.

"We might look at something that would attract those who aren't interested in sleeping in tents and be more like the accommodations in national parks," Keck said.

Overnight stays have long been popular at Big Basin, and the park's many campgrounds, from tent sites to primitive cabins, are usually full in the summer months.

Planners are also considering new camping facilities at Rancho del Oso, where the park meets the ocean north of Davenport, as well as an expanded coastal visitor center.

PUBLIC OPINION

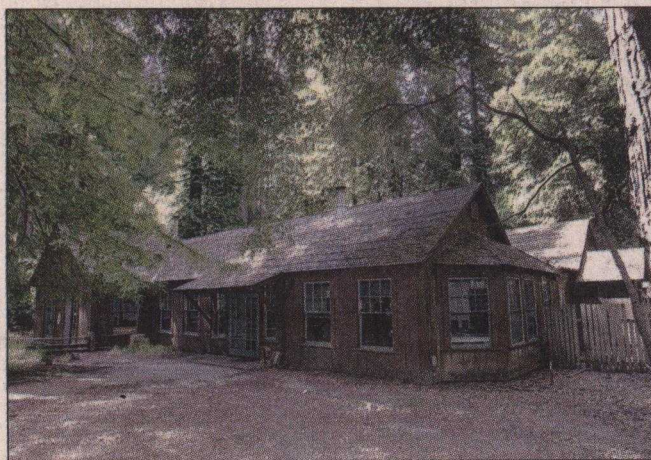
Local residents already have begun to speak up about what they'd like at Big Basin.

Mountain-biking groups are lobbying for more bike paths, particularly a route from the



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Campsites in Big Basin State Park are popular in the summer months and fill up quickly.



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Plans for the park include the possible renovation of the old Big Basin Lodge.

park headquarters to Rancho del Oso, similar to the popular "skyline-to-sea" itinerary that hikers and trail runners now enjoy. Equestrians are also pushing for greater access, suggesting more staging areas and loop trails.

Some want few, if any, new accommodations.

"New uses would put so much more pressure on the habitat, and we need to guard it," said Nancy Macy, with the Valley Women's Club. "That's why Big Basin was set up, to protect the redwoods."

State planners have formally released three alternatives for what the park should look like in the coming decades. The plans range from maximizing visitor accommodations to keeping the park almost the same as it is today. A final plan, due out next year

for the public to review, likely will blend parts of each.

Such general plans, while dictating a new vision, are not attached to new funding. That leaves any proposal uncertain and, given the state's budget problems, unlikely — at least until recently.

Proposition 21, which has qualified for the November ballot, offers the prospect of bringing a windfall of cash to the state park system. The measure would finance parks through vehicle registration fees.

"That's kind of the elephant in the room right now," said Reed Holderman, executive director of the Sempervirens Fund, which buys land for Big Basin and other parks to preserve. "It could be a whole new day for parks."

Proposition 21 would expe-

BIG BASIN GENERAL PLAN

State planners have released three alternative visions for the future of Big Basin Redwoods State Park from which a final plan will be drafted to guide decision-making there.

The alternatives range from maximizing visitor services, like building new welcome centers and a lodge, to keeping the park almost the same as it is today.

After holding several public workshops and meetings with stakeholders, planners expect to offer a revised plan next year. Public input will be gathered before the plan is finalized.

For information on the plan and planning process, visit www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=21486. To offer comment, e-mail generalplan@parks.ca.gov.

dite new park initiatives, including those offered in Big Basin's general plan, say Holderman and others.

Holderman, however, doesn't want to see planners rush to offer too much too soon.

"While it's good to increase the number of visitors, it's good to preserve the integrity of the experience as well," he said.