

Manassas National Battlefield Park

Pact Would Close Va. 234, U.S. 29

VIRGINIANA FILE BY RICHARD LEIGH

JM Staff Writer

While the National Park Service has offered a compromise proposal to move the proposed William Center mall away from an historically significant part of the tract to another part, its "main objective" is to close Va. 234 and U.S. 29 within the Manassas National Battlefield Park.

Park Service Director William Penn Mott proposed Thursday afternoon that these two roads "should be eliminated from the battlefield and reverted back to the original gravel roads that existed at the time of the battle." He and Interior Secretary Donald Hodel spoke at the Interior Department building Thursday afternoon.

If these roads can't be closed, Mott said, "We're concerned that the building of traffic on those roads will ultimately cause the battlefield to be of no consequence. We want some binding assurance that those roads will be closed and will be reverted back to their historical plan."

And whether these roads may be closed to traffic, Mott said, is largely up to Prince William County government.

Asked about the proposals Thursday night, Supervisor Chairman Kathleen Seefeldt said, "Some very interesting and positive suggestions are being made from a number of different perspectives." County officials want to examine them all, she said.

"The concern of the department is the short- and long-range protection of the park," said Hodel.

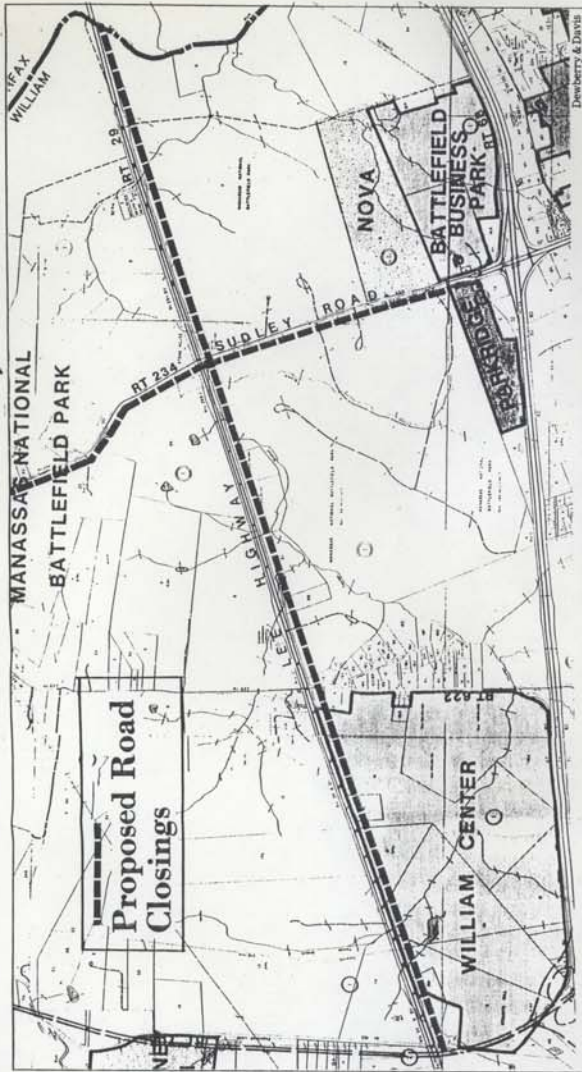
"Everybody agrees to the integrity of the battlefield," Mott said. "The problem is the increasing traffic at these two roads. We've been discussing the intersection at the Stone House for a few years."

Because of increasing traffic, local officials "at some point in time will want to widen these roads up into four-lane highways," Mott said. "At that point, you've destroyed the whole historical integrity of the park."

By this proposal, "everybody gains," Mott said. "Unless that objective is accomplished soon, we're going to lose because of the pressure on widening these roads" within the park.

The option that seems "a practical solution" is to move the major mall

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Battlefield Roads

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development from the top of the hill, where it would be very visible from the battlefield, to a location 60 feet lower at the southeastern corner of the William Center tract, he said.

The park service would "utilize the portion of the top of the hill near Lee's headquarters to tell the story of the battle," Mott said.

While this still would place the mall near the park's boundary, the developer has offered to provide screening, Mott said. The proposed location would not impact visually, where the present location would, he said.

The park service also urges completing the proposed Va. 234 bypass, with a major cloverleaf at I-66, Mott said. Traffic would be taken out of the park and put on the bypass. Traffic now using U.S. 29 would use I-66, which is planned for widening, he said.

Another option, to buy the William Center property, would not solve the highways problem, Mott said.

Statements made earlier that afternoon by U.S. Rep. Robert Mrazek, D-N.Y., that the Interior Department has funds available to buy historically significant lands threatened by development, were "not true," Mott said.

"We have no appropriated funds" to buy the William Center tract, he said. The NPS has not appraised the tract and does not know its value. Congress would have to be asked for an appropriation. The service would have to look at its whole acquisition program to see if this is a higher priority than others.

At one time, the park service tried to acquire the William Center tract, but excluded "from the park," Mott said.

Park service officials met with U.S. Rep. Morris Udall, D-Ariz., earlier that day, and with Mrazek, U.S. Rep. Michael Andrews, D-Texas, and U.S. Rep. Bruce Vento, D-Minn., that afternoon, Mott said.

These last three urged the purchase of the land, Mott said. However, Udall proposes a "good compromise," Mott said. While they agreed with the concept, the details have not been worked out, he said.

In discussions Thursday morning, Mott said, "He says he is willing to sit down and discuss it. He feels there are some elements that are quite satisfactory, but takes no commitment" whether he approves.

The park service has not approached the state over closing the roads. "A deal of that decision rests with how the county feels about it," Mott said. Both will be discussed further.