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Deal is near to shift traffic out of Manassas battlefield park

By [Robert McCartney](#), Published: March 6

The National Park Service and Virginia authorities are close to signing a major Civil War battlefield preservation deal that eventually would close two congested roads that slice through the twice-hallowed ground at Manassas.

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The agreement, which could be signed by the summer, would provide for routes 234 and 29 to be shut down inside Manassas National Battlefield Park. That would happen once new highways are built along the western and northern edges of the battlefield and serve as bypasses.

“We’re down to the wire here. It looks good,” said Ed Clark, the park superintendent, a key architect of the pact. “It puts the goal of removing all the traffic from the battlefield within sight.”

There are downsides, of course. It could be more than 20 years before both highways, sometimes called the [Bi-County Parkway](#) and the Battlefield Bypass, are completed. [Local residents and environmental groups](#) said they would destroy the rural character that drew them to western Prince William County. Some accuse the Park Service, which previously has resisted new roads and development, of selling them out.

On the bright side, however, shutting the roads inside the park would be one of the biggest achievements ever to restore the authenticity and improve the visitors’ experience at the premier Civil War battlefield closest to Washington.

The 1861 Battle of Manassas, known in the North as Bull Run, was the war’s first full-scale engagement. It’s the one where Washington’s elite naively took carriages 30 miles to the scene for a picnic, thinking war was a spectator sport.

They were shocked when the Rebels routed the Union troops and sent them scampering back to the capital.

The same ground was the site of a second battle a year later, even bloodier than the first. It marked one of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee’s greatest victories and helped encourage him to invade Maryland, where he was turned back at the historic battle at Antietam.

The Park Service and preservationists [have long been unhappy](#) principally with the steadily rising traffic inside the battlefield. On a typical workday, more than 50,000 vehicles pass through the intersection of 234 and 29 in the center of the park.

Congestion is so bad that it's often impossible to complete the driving tour that traces the highlights of Second Manassas.

"What we've been saying for more than a decade is the biggest threat to this park is the commuter and industrial traffic that goes through it every day," said Jim Campi, spokesman for the Civil War Trust.

Campi's group hasn't yet formally endorsed the deal, known as a Section 106 programmatic agreement under federal historic preservation law. His group wants to be sure the final form guarantees that both roads, and not just one, will eventually be closed. That's important because plans provide for the closures to be in two phases.

In the first phase, when the north-south, Bi-County Parkway is completed west of the park, 234 would be closed inside it. State and local authorities are keen to push that ahead quickly. Local residents who stand to lose property, and other groups, are agitating to block it.

The park would have to give up four acres of land for the Bi-County Parkway and allow a noisy, four-lane highway to be built nearby. Clark, the park superintendent, doesn't like that but says it would be worth it to eliminate a road that's also pretty noisy and cuts right through his battlefield.

"We're giving some on the periphery to get an awful lot in the core, in the center of the park," Clark said.

In the second phase, possibly as late as 2035, the Battlefield Bypass would be built north of the park. Only then would 29 be closed within it.

Clark said that as part of the deal, he insisted that the Virginia Department of Transportation pledge firmly to close both roads once the new highways are built. His nightmare would be that he agrees to new highways just outside his park, only to see the state renege on its promise to shut the roads within.

"They would have to double-cross us to do that," Clark said. "We have to operate in good faith here that they're going to stick to their word."

I discuss local issues Friday at 8:50 a.m. on WAMU (88.5 FM). For previous columns, go to washingtonpost.com/mccartney.

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