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State Rep. Davey Hiott, R-Pickens, gets ready to help cut the ribbon for the new Jocassee Gorges Visitor Center.

Gorges 'gateway' opens

New Jocassee visitor center looks to expand beyond 2 hours a day

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State officials and locals have opened the Jocassee Gorges Visitor Center — a collection of exhibits detailing points of interest in the roughly 50,000-acre tract and the history of the area.

But there is some concern that the center, described in a state Department of Natural Resources press release as "the gateway to the Jocassee Gorges," is scheduled to be open only two hours a day.

"That is the weak link in that entire facility, hours of operation," said Dennis Chastain, a naturalist and Pickens County resident who attended the ribbon-cutting that marked the opening of the center.

According to the DNR press release, the new center, located at the Keowee-Toxaway State Natural Area off State 11, will be open 11 a.m.-noon and 4-5 p.m. daily. However, Phil Gaines, state park director for the state Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department, said efforts will be made to extend the hours during times of heaviest use.

"We are going to adjust those hours during peak seasons," he said. "Particularly during the fall leaf season and on weekends, it will be open more than two hours a day."

Gaines said PRT is also seeking community volunteers to work at the center.

"We encourage folks to volunteer to help keep the building staffed," he said. "But it is one of the challenges that we have now — with the economy, it's very difficult to staff the eight hours of the day. But we're aggressively trying to find volunteers … who can assist in keeping the facility open longer."

Chastain said the center, which was created through a joint effort by PRT and the state Department of Natural Resources, is a great stepping-off point for visitors to the gorges, whether they are out-of-state tourists or locals.

"We really have needed a place where folks can go and get a taste of the Jocassee Gorges without having to actually go back into the heart of what local people call 'the Horsepasture,'" he said. "Even the cultural history is represented there, from native Americans to the very earliest of settlers."