

High Falls restrooms in need of upgrades

BY JUSTIN LEE CAMPBELL
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — During a tour of the restrooms at High Falls County Park in Seneca Thursday, Oconee County parks, recreation and tourism director Phil Shirley highlighted the lack of a 5-foot turnaround needed for wheelchair access.

"You have to have at least one toilet you can get your wheelchair in with a 5-foot radius and use the restroom," Shirley said. "We've got five restrooms in the park, and none of them have that."

Shirley is waiting to see if county council will provide funding for restroom renovations to bring the park into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act in the

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Oconee County parks, recreation and tourism director Phil Shirley gave a tour of the restrooms connected to a shelter at High Falls County Park in Seneca on Thursday.

UPGRADES: 'We owe it to citizens who have

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2018-19 fiscal year general fund budget.

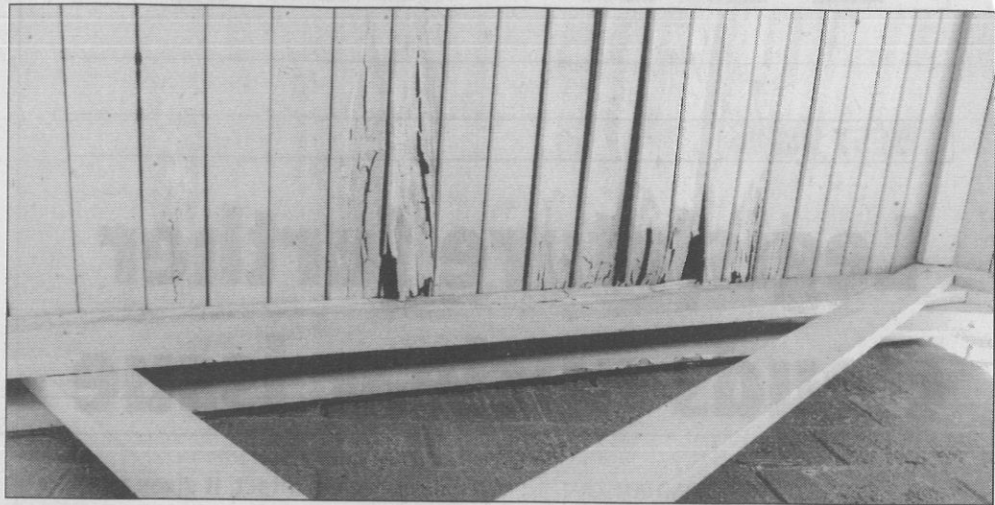
County council will decide whether or not to include \$250,000 for restroom renovations in the budget. Council passed first reading of the budget ordinance in title only Tuesday without the High Falls renovations.

Shirley said neither High Falls, South Cove nor Chau Ram county parks had ADA-compliant restrooms when he became director in 2005. After ADA updates to South Cove restrooms in 2006, Shirley was hopeful Chau Ram and High Falls would get ADA-compliant restrooms, too.

Shirley first requested ADA updates for Chau Ram and High Falls in 2009. Funding for Chau Ram has been identified, but there is still no approved funding for the High Falls work.

Shirley said the facility faces possible closure "due to safety" until upgrades can be made.

"This would close the lakefront shelter at the beach area," he said. "While there are no direct penalties, the continued risk of not having adequate facilities places our staff in the position of turning people away who



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A shelter built in the 1970s at High Falls County Park in Seneca has a roof with rotting wood. Oconee County parks, recreation and tourism director Phil Shirley said the shelter needs repairs, while the restrooms connected are in need of upgrades to make them accessible to people with disabilities.

require ADA access to our facilities."

High Falls park rangers Antonio Cortez and Jason Zimmerman agreed the restrooms need upgrades. Cortez and Zimmerman confirmed what Shirley told The Journal: people frequently complain about the restrooms.

"(People with disabilities) know when they come here, they have to be in a big group of people to assist them with the restrooms," Zimmerman said. "They can't get in and out."

The budget ordinance passed in title only Tuesday included additional

school resource officers and a full-time deputy coroner. Council did not discuss projects prioritized by council not yet in the proposed budget, including the ADA upgrades at High Falls.

Councilman Julian Davis said High Falls "definitely needs" upgrades.

"We owe it to citizens who have disabilities a safe place to enjoy parks just like those without disabilities," Davis said.

Councilman Paul Cain said county officials have

known about the ADA compliance problems for years, and council has talked about the issue for years.

"I believe Oconee County should be a welcoming place for all people, including those with disabilities," he said. "We've spent money to make (the county offices on) South Pine Street handicap accessible. That was something important to take care of. It's important to do that with county parks."

Needed ADA upgrades

disabilities'

at High Falls are for Shirley part of a bigger picture involving the park system as whole. Shirley said the county also lacks ADA access for courtesy docks on Lake Keowee and Lake Hartwell and ADA campsites at Chau Ram and High Falls.

Shirley said funding ADA accessibility "should have been a priority years ago," but continues to be "pushed aside."

"If someone gets hurt, then we're in a bad position," Shirley said. "We have been lucky thus far where we haven't had anyone get hurt. Eight years now we've been trying to upgrade the restrooms. We're close."

Shirley said if funding is approved for renovations to High Falls restrooms, he hopes to bid out that project and the one at Chau Ram this fall.

All five county council members are scheduled to convene at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday for the council's budget, finance and administration committee meeting in council chambers at 415 S. Pine St. in Walhalla.

justin@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6685
Follow on Twitter @jlcampbell90