

## **Background regarding the Pellissippi Blueway**

Two Oak Ridge-based organizations, Advocates for the Oak Ridge Reservation (AFORR) and Tennessee Citizens for Wilderness Planning (TCWP), with a combined history of over 70 years of attention to the natural resources of Oak Ridge, would like to share a vision for our City's natural assets. Our vision stems from the 2019 City Blueprint, a living plan meant to guide community growth and development in Oak Ridge. The Blueprint involved extensive citizen participation and reflects our citizens' priority on natural assets. Following from the Blueprint, a Natural Assets Guidebook was recently provided to the City.

Oak Ridge is indeed a "Secret City" and an unusually vibrant small town. Not only do we host a world-class science facility (and Tennessee's single largest employer) but, unlike other cities of our size, we feature many amenities ranging from an excellent school system to a community symphony and an active performance theater. We also enjoy benefits of numerous community events, festivals, concerts, and other activities usually found only in larger communities, as well as several museums and, now, the Manhattan Project National Historic Park. However, what truly sets Oak Ridge apart is the wealth of natural opportunities that exist here. Perhaps our best secret is that we truly are an "Outdoor City." As a result of the city's unique history, we are surrounded by an abundance of green space that is a legacy of the Manhattan Project. Greenness sets Oak Ridge apart from the haphazardly divided and developed landscapes of the region's urban areas. In addition to the extensive open space within the city, 30,000 acres of Federal land borders the Clinch River. The Clinch River corridor has significant scenic value, supports high natural biodiversity, and offers myriad opportunities to contribute to the health and well-being of our citizens and to make Oak Ridge a desirable place to live. What other towns offer such extensive hiking, rowing, paddling, boating, mountain biking, road biking, skiing, fishing, hunting, swimming, and birding opportunities - all within city boundaries?

We agree wholeheartedly that our natural assets should not remain a secret. We hereby encourage the community to recognize and enhance an "Pellissippi Blueway" from Melton Lake Park to Melton Hill Dam, with Clark Center Park as a key access point. The 26+ miles of the Clinch River cradles our most under-recognized natural asset: a blueway. The Blueway could provide greater opportunities for residents and visitors to appreciate the vast tracts of forested land bordering the Clinch River, while maintaining its treasured natural attributes. Oak Ridge already has active fishing and rowing communities, but we also have the potential to easily connect the marina area, Haw Ridge, Solway Park, Clark Center

# Map of Proposed Blueway

## Oak Ridge Blue Way Concept



Park, and the Tennessee Valley Authority's Melton Hill Dam with a true destination-type attraction: adventure paddling. Given that Oak Ridge already has more dedicated bike trail mileage than Knoxville and surrounding towns, particularly with the exceptional mountain bike facilities at Haw Ridge, it makes sense to diversify our outdoor offerings. We propose to enhance the Pellissippi Blueway while conserving and protecting the natural landscapes that maintain the good water quality, shoreline scenery, and wildlife habitat enjoyed by all.

Clark Center Park is a key part of our vision for a Blueway. This dedicated public recreation site is located on the inlet between Freels Bend and Gallaher Bend and has for decades been a popular lakefront site for boating, fishing, picnicking, swimming, and other recreational activities. A Blueway could use river access locations to service paddlers (for example, to rent or return kayaks and canoes), and Clark Center Park is a key access location between Solway Park and Melton Hill Dam. The US Department of Energy (DOE) has owned and operated this park for many years and would like to transfer it to another entity that would maintain it for public use, but so far local governments have been reluctant to accept it due to costs and liabilities. We see the permanent protection of the Three Bend Area and a renaissance of Clark Center Park as two key elements of the Pellissippi Blueway. Clark Center Park should be transformed into a public destination park with a singular focus on the waterfront and its other natural surroundings. Removal of the ballfields and other infrastructure remaining from the park's early years as a recreation center will reduce costs and liabilities. Retaining boating and fishing opportunities while making further enhancements, including addition of kayak and canoe rental and shuttle concessions, would complete the vision of the Pellissippi Blueway.

This Blueway would run through the unfragmented forests and high biodiversity of the DOE Reservation. The conservation significance of these forested areas has long been recognized and documented by DOE, state agencies, and national conservation groups. The Three Bend Area is a 3000-acre tract of particular value where the Clinch River meanders through three large river bends that are rich in history, wildlife, habitat diversity, and natural beauty. In June 1999 the Secretary of Energy designated the Three Bend Scenic and Wildlife Management Refuge Area to be managed for preservation purposes as part of an initiative to protect ecologically valuable lands on DOE sites across the nation. The Three Bends, including Solway Bend, Freels Bend, and Gallaher Bend, are managed for DOE by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency. The public has limited access to these areas for hunting, hiking and bicycling on the public greenway trail on Gallaher Bend, and for special guided walks and visits. The Blueway is an opportunity to

experience this scenic area without additional infrastructure that could spoil resources that the Three Bend Area protects.

Our organizations are enthusiastic about the potential to transform Clark Center Park and realize the vision for the Pellissippi Blueway. Imagine an extended, all-day, family paddling opportunity that includes the natural beauty and wildlife of this unspoiled area. Or a day of family fun that includes swimming, hiking, fishing, and paddling opportunities, guided by a National Park ranger. We are eager to work with government agencies at all levels, recreational retailers, and other organizations to make our Blueway vision a reality.

***Supporting resources and notes:***

In 2001, the Tennessee Division of Natural Heritage identified five natural core areas that contain isolated, rare species or significant species assemblages (see <https://www.aforr.org/natareasmap.html>), and a November 2009 ORNL report "Natural Areas Analysis and Evaluation – Oak Ridge Reservation" (<https://info.ornl.gov/sites/publications/files/Pub21101.pdf>) inventoried a number of tracts of significant ecological value.

For the most part, lands on the DOE Reservation are not publicly accessible because they support DOE missions, and some have other use restrictions under lawfully binding Tennessee State Natural Area management plans.

<http://tnlandforms.us/blueway/>