



Northwest Georgia Outdoor Recreation Summit



June 15 - 16, 2026
Emerson, Georgia

n^rthwest
GEORGIA
REGIONAL COMMISSION



Cartersville
MUSEUM CITY

Sunday

June 14, 2026

4:00 pm – 6:00 pm

Early Registration – LakePoint Sports Complex

Monday

June 15, 2026

7:30 am – 9:00 am

Registration

8:00 am – 9:45 am

Breakfast – Main Conference Room

8:45 am – 9:00 am

Welcome – Main Conference Room

Boyd Austin, Executive Director, Northwest Georgia Regional Commission
Steve Taylor, Bartow County Sole Commissioner

9:00–10:15 am

Developing Regional Trail Connections: The Myths and Realities of Making Long-Distance Trail Systems a Reality.

(Court 10)

Noel Durant, Tennessee State Director, Trust for Public Land (*Moderator*)

Doug Hattaway, Southeast Conservation Director, Trust for Public Land

Julie Smith, Transportation and Trails Planner, City of Rome

Jared Carter, Yellowhammer Outdoor Development

Eric Pullen, Director of Economic Development, City of Chickamauga

Connected trail systems are increasingly recognized as powerful drivers of outdoor recreation, economic development, and quality of life, but bringing them to reality requires navigating a complex landscape of obstacles. This panel session will explore both the opportunities and the real-world challenges of developing and sustaining connected trail networks that span municipal, county, and regional boundaries. Bringing together a diverse group of practitioners, the session will highlight perspectives from statewide outdoor recreation development, local trail system planning and implementation, trail acquisition, and grassroots community advocacy. Panelists will share lessons learned from successful collaborations as well as candid insights into the barriers that often slow progress. Attendees will gain practical strategies for building partnerships, leveraging funding and policy tools, and sustaining momentum across jurisdictions.

10:15–10:30 am

BREAK

10:30–11:45 am

Breakout Period I

Parks and Rec Pickle: How to Plan for Popular Pickleball

(Court 10)

Daniel Gaddis, AICP, Program Coordinator, GA Dept. of Community Affairs

Edward Guzman, City Manager, City of Cedartown

Stuart Nichols, CYSA, Director, Towns County Parks & Recreation

Jessica Catlett, Marketing & PR Director, Valdosta-Lowndes County

This session will be a panel featuring three different unique approaches to providing pickleball programming from local governments around the state. Land use, funding, sound mitigation, and political dynamics will be explored in this panel, helping the audience make real connections and address this very real trend (not a fad).



Planning creates spaces; stewardship sustains them

(Meeting Room 10)

Samantha Bishop, Senior Planner, City of Rome

Hannah Bagley, Coordinator, Keep Rome-Floyd Beautiful

This session examines how Rome and Floyd County collaborated to integrate green infrastructure, forestry planning, and collaborative leadership to enhance quality of life, drive economic development, and build lasting community value.

11:45 am – 1:00 pm

LUNCH

Keynote Speaker: George Dusenbury – Vice President and Southern Regional Director, Trust for Public Land

The keynote presentation will offer a compelling perspective on: The current state of outdoor recreation throughout Georgia, emerging opportunities and challenges across the region, and what's on the horizon for the Georgia Outdoor Recreation Coalition

1:15 pm – 2:30 pm

Breakout Period II

Local Success Stories: Trails for Recreation and Economic Development (TRED)

(Court 10)

Julie Smith, Transportation and Trails Planner, City of Rome

Rome, Georgia offers a standout example of how effective a public-private partnership can be. In 2012, TRED (Trails for Recreation and Economic Development) was created to solve a simple but important problem: connecting two disconnected trail segments. Fourteen years later, that initiative has grown into a thriving collaboration with the City of Rome and Floyd County, resulting in more than 20 miles of multi-use and off-road trails with distinctive features that serve residents and visitors alike. With additional projects on the horizon, the community is poised to expand trail access even further. This session explores how other communities can leverage their existing assets, build strong partnerships, and create new trail systems—or enhance the ones they already have.

Appalachia United Outdoors

(Meeting Room 10)

Noel Durant, Tennessee State Director, Trust for Public Land

Rena Ann Peck, CEO, Georgia Rivers

This session will share how the Appalachia United Outdoors program is building a more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient future for rural communities. Across Appalachia, outdoor recreation is a powerful engine for economic growth, public health, and climate resilience—but opportunity isn't always easily accessible in these remote areas. Learn how Trust for Public Land is launching a five-phase, community-centered strategy to help rural communities tap into the \$1.1 trillion outdoor recreation economy, including how Appalachia United Outdoors is coming to life through the Dade County Community Forest and creation of paddling access to Lookout Creek through this innovative, community-driven land protection and stewardship effort.

2:30pm – 2:45pm

Break

2:45pm – 4:00 pm

Georgia Department of Natural Resources Funding Programs Panel

(Court 10)

Ouicia Jolly, Recreational Trails Program Coordinator, GA DNR

Soheila Naji, Grants Unit Supervisor & GOSP Coordinator, GA DNR

Rayne Gaston, LWCF Grant Coordinator, GA DNR

This panel will provide an in-depth overview of three of the state's most impactful conservation and outdoor recreation funding sources: the Recreational Trails Program, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and the Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Program. Panelists will explore how each program supports the planning, development, and long-term stewardship of parks, trails, greenways, and natural areas across Georgia. Attendees will gain practical insight into eligibility requirements, application strategies, and best practices for aligning local and regional projects with program goals. The discussion will also highlight successful funded projects from communities across the state, illustrating how these investments are enhancing quality of life, strengthening local economies, and expanding access to outdoor recreation.

5:00 pm – 7:00 pm

Happy Hour and Networking
(LakePoint Atrium)

Tuesday

June 16, 2026

8:00 am – 9:00 am

Breakfast

8:30 am – 12:00pm

Excursions- Pine Mountain Hike and Euharlee Creek Kayaking

9:00 am – 10:15 am

Breakout Period I

From Utility to Amenity: Reimagining Reservoirs for Multi-Use Recreation

(Meeting Room 10)

Andrew Parker, City Manager, City of Dalton

Michael Justus, Parks and Recreation Director, Paulding County

Scott McNally, PE, Croy Engineering

This session explores how two northwest Georgia communities (The City of Dalton, and Paulding County) have successfully adapted public drinking water reservoirs into high-value outdoor recreation assets that support broader community and economic development goals. Participants will learn how each community navigated the technical, regulatory, and planning challenges of balancing drinking water protection with public access and recreation. The session will highlight strategies used to integrate walking trails, fishing access, boating opportunities, and passive recreation amenities while maintaining water quality and operational integrity. Presenters will also discuss how these reservoir-based projects have become catalysts for local quality-of-life improvements, tourism potential, and private investment. Attendees will gain practical insights into partnership development among local governments, utilities, and state agencies, as well as lessons learned on public engagement, long-term maintenance, and sustainable site design.

The Impact of Recreation Tourism on Small Towns

(Court 10)

Katherine Moore, AICP, Georgia Conservancy

Nick Johnson, AICP, Programs Director, Georgia Conservancy

What do small and rural communities offer in competition to their big sister metro areas? Authentic places, outdoor recreational opportunities and intact natural assets! This session will highlight the impact that recreational tourism can have on communities and why recreationists, conservationists and small town economic developers make logical partners, as well as offer planning recommendations to ensure recreation opportunities are fully integrated into economic development strategies. Attendees will learn about strategies that have been applied in example communities across the southeast to link stakeholders in outdoor recreation, natural resource conservation and small town economic development.

The discussion will promote the role of recreational activity as a significant economic sector for a small community and will present planning priorities to ensure supporting programs and infrastructure are contemplated in town and regional planning efforts to capitalize on recreation assets.

10:15 am – 10:30 am

Break

10:30 am – 11:45 am

Investing in the Outdoors: Grant Strategies with Economic Impact

(Court 10)

Annaka Woodruff, Program Manager, Appalachian Regional Commission

Outdoor recreation is more than an amenity—it's a powerful driver of economic growth across Appalachia. This session explores how communities can strategically leverage funding from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) to develop recreation assets that attract visitors, support local businesses, and enhance quality of life. Participants will gain a practical understanding of ARC's funding priorities from successful projects from across the region that have used trails, blueways, and parks to spark downtown revitalization, expand tourism economies, and create lasting community impact. Attendees will also learn how to build competitive applications, align recreation projects with broader economic development strategies, and form partnerships that strengthen funding proposals. Whether you're planning a new trail system, activating a waterfront, or expanding access to natural assets, this session will provide actionable insights to turn outdoor recreation into a catalyst for sustainable economic development.

12:00 pm – 1:00 pm

LUNCH

1:15 pm – 2:30 pm

Breakout Period II

Illuminating Recreation: Best Practices for lighting Parks, Trails, and Outdoor Spaces

(Court 10)

Mike McCowen, Account Executive, Georgia Power

Austin Gaines Sports Lighting Division Leader, SouthCon

As outdoor recreation continues to grow in popularity, communities are increasingly investing in lighting solutions that extend usability, improve safety, and enhance user experience without compromising natural resources. This session explores the latest technologies and proven best practices in outdoor lighting design for parks, trails, sports facilities, and waterfronts. Attendees will gain insight into innovations such as energy-efficient LED systems, smart controls, and adaptive lighting strategies that respond to user activity and environmental conditions. Panelists will also address key considerations including minimizing light pollution, protecting wildlife habitats, improving public safety, and balancing aesthetics with functionality. Through real-world examples and cross-disciplinary perspectives (from planners and engineers to park managers and designers) this session will equip participants with practical tools and strategies to implement effective, sustainable lighting solutions that support vibrant, accessible, and environmentally responsible recreation spaces.

Utilizing Non-Recreational Spaces for Nature

(Meeting Room 10)

Dr. Mark Patterson, Patterson Ecological Consultants

Recreation sites are too often designed around active play areas, while spaces not intended for recreation are frequently overlooked. Many of these areas, however, can be repurposed for passive recreation and outdoor pursuits. In this session, participants will learn effective approaches for transforming underutilized, non-recreational spaces into attractive outdoor recreation assets. These conversions can reduce ongoing maintenance needs—lowering

labor and material costs—while increasing site appeal and expanding potential uses. The same strategies can also be applied in other settings, including business campuses and commercial districts.

2:30 pm – 2:45 pm

Break

2:45 pm – 4:00 pm

Breakout Period III

Saving Our Subterranean Treasures: Protecting Caves for Recreation, Education, and Conservation

(Court 10)

T.O. Smith, Director of Conservation, Southeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc.

Caves are among our most unique and fragile natural resources—offering unparalleled opportunities for outdoor recreation, environmental education, and biodiversity conservation. Yet increasing visitation, development pressures, and a lack of public awareness threaten these delicate underground ecosystems. This session will explore efforts to protect and utilize the many caves found in the southeastern United States.

Safer Steps and Smoother Rides: Georgia’s First Rural Active Transportation Plan

(Meeting Room 10)

Ron Knezevich, PE, RSP, Manager, safety program at GDOT

Allison Bell, AICP

The Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) and VHB are developing the Georgia Rural Statewide Active Transportation Plan (Rural ATP), a first-of-its-kind statewide effort to improve active transportation in small towns and rural areas across the state. Active transportation includes walking, bicycling, and micromobility options such as scooters and e-bikes. Guided by national best practices, the plan will provide a framework for investments, policies, programs, and project recommendations to improve safety, connectivity, comfort, mobility, and education for vulnerable road users, pedestrians, and cyclists. The planning process includes a robust public and stakeholder engagement effort to better understand existing conditions, perceptions, and needs and to help shape a shared vision and guiding principles for the future of active transportation in rural Georgia.

From Visitor Spending to Community Spaces: Leveraging Tourism to Enhance Outdoor Recreation

(Meeting Room 9)

Christie Gribble, President, Fannin County Chamber of Commerce & Tourism

Eddie O’Neal, Director, Fannin County Parks and Recreation

What happens when tourism investment is intentionally directed back into community assets? In Fannin County, Georgia, partnerships between the Fannin County Chamber & Tourism Office, Fannin County Recreation Department, local government, and community stakeholders have transformed visitor-generated revenue into meaningful recreation improvements that benefit both residents and visitors alike. This session explores how Tourism Product Development funding has supported projects including river access enhancements, playgrounds, pickleball courts, walking paths, splash pads, and park revitalization efforts across multiple public spaces. Attendees will learn how collaboration, strategic planning, and shared community vision can strengthen outdoor recreation infrastructure while also supporting economic development, quality of life, and destination stewardship in a rural mountain community.

4:00 pm – 4:30 pm

Closing Remarks and Grand Prize Raffle

Safe Travels Home

