



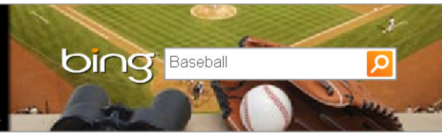
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A Showcase: Visitor center is model of environmental thrift



Journal Photo by Monte Mitchell

The new Northwest North Carolina Visitor Center and rest area with its cistern.

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By Monte Mitchell

JOURNAL REPORTER

Published: October 1, 2009

NORTH WILKESBORO - The Northwest North Carolina Visitor Center and rest area, which will open today beside U.S. 421 northbound, is the state's first green rest area.

Environmentally friendly features include the front lawn's 28,000-gallon cistern that will collect rainwater to flush the toilets. Solar panels above the building's main entrance will pre-heat water for the sinks. Large windows provide natural light for much of the building, and motion sensors will cut lights off when people aren't around.

The design and construction work cost \$12 million, and state officials say savings on energy will help recoup that cost. Wilkes County, North Wilkesboro and Wilkesboro provided land, water and sewer, dividing the \$1.1 million cost evenly.

Hosts at the Northwest North Carolina Visitor Center will provide brochures and information about 10 counties: Alexander, Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Caldwell, Iredell, Surry, Watauga, Wilkes and Yadkin.

N.C. Department of Transportation and local officials will open the center, which is about half a mile west of the intersection of U.S. 421 and N.C. 115, with a ribbon cutting at 10:30 a.m. today.

"It's really an opportunity to showcase the entire region," said Linda Cheek, the president of the Wilkes County Chamber of Commerce, which will provide the visitor center employees.

DOT spokeswoman Dara Demi said the building's environmental improvements make it about 37 percent more efficient in saving energy than if it had been built with standard methods. It has extra insulation, and the light-green roof is covered in a smooth-energy-rated membrane that doesn't absorb as much heat in the summer and collects rainwater efficiently.

Based on rainfall averages in Wilkes County, she said, the cistern is expected to supply about 309,000 gallons of rainwater a year, and will cut the use of treated water by about 75 percent. Treated water will still be used for the sinks and water fountains.

The DOT is applying for a gold-standard certification for the building in the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program.

Local officials are proud of the building and say it will generate interest in the area, but they acknowledge that the project probably wouldn't have been started in today's economy.

The contracts were signed before the economic crisis became a national issue. Construction started in January 2008.

But officials say they believe the visitor center will provide an economic stimulus for the area.

"We hope to prove that," Cheek said. "We'll keep numbers and see how the occupancy increases ... at least they'll be more aware of what is available to them."

The visitor center will include rotating exhibits showcasing the various counties. An artists' exhibit from Wilkes and Surry counties is on display now. Apples will be

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offered to promote Saturday's Brushy Mountain Apple Festival in North Wilkesboro.

Boxes of brochures and community guides about accommodations, attractions and events have been unpacked and set out for today's opening. Local companies have provided much of the furnishings and equipment.

"We think it's going to be a tremendous asset," said Wilkes County Board of Commissioners Chairman Zach Henderson.

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