

Safety is the number one concern for BMTA

To The News Observer,

As you know, Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) normally schedules four or five or more hikes per month. Of course, these are not normal times. Nevertheless, because hiking in the outdoors is good for one's mental and physical health, we encourage BMTA members and others to continue hiking as much as possible during this national health crisis and to do so safely. To that end, we are continuing our hiking program and welcome people to hike with us. In the interests of safety, we have instituted some important modifications:

1. Only hikes that do not require shuttles are allowed under the auspices of BMTA – thus, we are doing only loop hikes (ones that essentially go around in a circle, ending up where we started without retracing any of the trail) and ones that we call “in-and-out” hikes (where we hike a portion of a trail and then turn around and hike back to the starting place where we left our cars).

2. All hikers must drive to the meeting place and trailhead in their own cars – no carpooling except among family members.

These first two principles result in no one traveling in anyone else's car.

3. A potential hiker who is feeling ill, has traveled within the past 14 days to a location with a significant number of cases of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), or has been exposed within the past 14 days to a person who has been confirmed as or is even suspected of having COVID-19 must not come on a hike.

4. All hikes are limited to 10 participants – so far, we've had fewer than that, which is fine.

5. Before, during, and after a hike, participants must maintain an appropriate social distance from one another (an absolute minimum of six feet – 10 is desired).

So, we hope not to have any contagious hikers, but if that should happen inadvertently, we prevent contagion by riding only in our own cars, restricting the number of hikers, and maintaining appropriate distances between hikers. These rules are explained to prospective hikers in advance of the hike and again at the meeting place. Of course, we are not hiking on any trails that are closed, nor will we select trails to hike on that are likely to be crowded. Hike leaders are experienced and knowledgeable hikers and hike leaders. Safety is our first priority.

So, although most of the oth-

er “community events” that you might include in your listing are canceled because they are indoors and cannot be conducted safely, hiking remains a beneficial activity that promotes health and fitness and can be done safely. Indeed, for precisely these reasons, Gilmer County and others recognize hiking as an “essential activity” that is exempt from the stay-at-home orders. BMTA's hike leaders are willing to volunteer their service to the community to lead these hikes, and we hope you will continue to help us promote them. Please contact me if you have any questions.

Ken Cissna
BMTA Hike Director