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can quickly enter the subsurface," Bledsoe explained. "It is one of the reasons our water resources are vulnerable in karst areas to the activities that we do on the surface."

The documentary also highlighted the environmental recovery of Hidden River Cave in Horse Cave, where decades of pollution once left the underground water system severely contaminated.

David Foster, the President and CEO of the American Cave Conservation Association in Horse Cave, described how the development of a regional sewage treatment system in 1989 helped end the discharge of waste into the cave's groundwater system, allowing its ecosystem to recover.

"The odor went away first, and then we started to see the cave life come back," Foster said in the film. "And to our amazement, we had gone from being one of the most polluted caves in America, and perhaps in the world, to one of the most biologically diverse caves."

The recovery of Hidden River Cave also helped create opportunities for tourism and environmental education, demonstrating the economic benefits that can accompany successful conservation efforts.

For Bledsoe, those efforts illustrate why the protection of Mammoth Cave's natural resources cannot be considered separately from the surrounding communities.

"While the national park is the heart, it is the core of our biosphere region, the boundaries of our biosphere region don't stop there," she said. "It includes all of us, it includes our gateway communities, right? And we are connected through all of this. Whether it is tourism and all the related services that bring billions of dollars to our local economy, whether it's agriculture, whether it's industry, water connects all of us."

Bledsoe encouraged residents to recognize their responsibility in determining how the region's natural resources are managed, emphasizing that those decisions affect both the environment and the livelihoods of the people who depend on it.

"It's our responsibility to make the choices on how we best manage our natural resources," she said.

Rick Olson, a retired Mammoth Cave National Park ecologist who spent 28 years working at the park, continued the discussion by explaining how the region's sinkholes, underground drainage systems, and the Green River connect communities across county lines.

Olson, who first began exploring Mammoth Cave in 1973, told those in attendance that understanding those connections is essential when considering development on the sinkhole plain.

"We live in a karst landscape," Olson said. "And, you know, from Brownsville to Park City to Cave City to Horse Cave to Munfordville, we're all kind of in this together. It all drains to the same river."

Olson explained that rainfall entering the region's sinkholes carries organic material into underground streams, where it supports bacteria and other small organisms that form the foundation of the cave food chain. Those organisms, in turn, provide food for larger aquatic species, including cave crayfish, blind fish, and the endangered Kentucky cave shrimp.

"And out here on the sinkhole plain, this is the feedwaters for our cave systems," Olson said.

The concern, he explained, is what happens when natural surfaces are replaced, changing how water enters the underground system.

"Whenever we harden a surface, whether it's a highway, or homes, or roads, or big factories, something like that, we convert something that was actually feeding, we hope, clean water and nutrients into the cave systems into something that provides runoff," Olson said.

Olson expressed particular concern about the proposed development's apparent location near the boundary of two underground drainage basins, where water could flow toward different cave systems.

"Headwaters of drainage basins are the most sensitive place," Olson said. "Unfortunately, where they're talking about building this is apparently right on the boundary line between two drainage basins. Most of it is probably going to go to the Hidden River Basin. They're going to get most of it, and then some of it is probably going to go to the Turnhole Basin and into the national park."

If those drainage patterns are confirmed, changes in runoff or water quality associated with the proposed data center in Cave City could have implications for groundwater systems connected to both Hidden River Cave in Horse Cave and Mammoth Cave National Park. Determining the precise drainage patterns and potential impacts would require site-specific scientific evaluation.

Olson also discussed the Green River, which receives water from the region's underground cave systems and plays an important role in sustaining aquatic life beneath the surface. Although underground springs normally discharge water into the river, heavy rainfall upstream can raise river levels enough to force water back into the caves.

"That turns out to be a really, really important natural process," Olson said.

He explained that the returning water carries small fish larvae and other organisms into the cave environment, providing food for species that have adapted to living entirely underground.

"The animals that are adapted, fully adapted to the cave, they cannot survive on the surface," Olson said. "So now, if that water is contaminated when it back floods in, that's very bad news."

Olson pointed to historical pollution associated with oil production upstream of Mammoth Cave as an example of the consequences contamination can have on underground ecosystems. Saltwater brine discharged into the Green River decades ago, he said, may have contributed to a decline in the Kentucky cave shrimp, a federally endangered species found only in the Mammoth Cave region.

The Kentucky cave shrimp has also become a central concern for coalition organizer Judy Jessie Crabtree, who told attendees that protecting the species was among the reasons she became involved in opposing the proposed development.

Crabtree, who lived in Cave City for approximately two decades and raised her children there, said her concerns about the proposed development grew from research she had previously conducted on Barren County's history.

"I didn't even know what a data center was six months ago. I'm telling you, you learn a lot," Crabtree said. "But the way I got involved is when I started hearing about it, I thought, 'Well, they can't put in a data center near Mammoth Cave.' Because I had written a book three years ago about the 225-year history of Barren County, and I did two years of research on that. So, I knew that Mammoth Cave National Park had a little shrimp that the only place in the world it lives is in Mammoth Cave National Park."

Referring to an image of the shrimp displayed during the meeting, Crabtree described the species as an important part of the coalition's efforts.

"That's going to be our David and Goliath story, I think," she said. "We don't want it to become extinct."

According to National Park Service information distributed at the meeting, the Kentucky cave shrimp is a federally endangered freshwater crustacean that spends its entire life in the darkness of underground cave passages. The species' habitat includes 10 groundwater basins, eight of which lie wholly or partially within Mammoth Cave National Park, while two are located immediately upstream. The Roaring River within Mammoth Cave is designated critical habitat for the species.

Because the shrimp depend on microorganisms and biological material carried into the cave environment by groundwater, changes in water quality can pose a serious threat to their survival.

The Kentucky cave shrimp was also recognized as the 2025 USA Cave Animal of the Year, a distinction Crabtree believes could help bring national attention to the coalition's concerns.

The meeting also provided an opportunity for coalition members to explain the organization's position and encourage greater public involvement.

Crabtree said the coalition was formed approximately two weeks earlier after she became frustrated with what she considered a lack of opportunity for residents to express their concerns during a public meeting about zoning. She subsequently contacted friends and other concerned citizens, including Angie Herald and Sherry Williams, who helped organize the grassroots effort.

Crabtree emphasized that the coalition is not opposed to data centers in general, but believes the proposed location is inappropriate because of its proximity to homes, farmland, and Mammoth Cave National Park.

"We're not against a data center. We all use them. I want to make that perfectly clear," Crabtree said. "We just don't want them near our homes. We don't want them in the farmland. We certainly don't want it by a national park."

The coalition's stated mission is to protect Cave City and Mammoth Cave National Park from potential adverse effects of data center development on cave systems, groundwater, wildlife habitats, and the tourism economy.

Crabtree also recognized Cave City Mayor-elect Clifton Parsley and newly elected Barren County District 6 Magistrate Steven Gibson, telling attendees that both had expressed opposition to the proposed data center development.

At the end of the meeting, coalition member Sherry Williams spoke about the importance of balancing economic growth with the preservation of natural resources, drawing from her own family's history in Barren County.

FIGHT CONTINUED ON PAGE EIGHT

REQUEST FOR QUALIFICATIONS/PROPOSAL

This is a Request for Qualifications/Proposal to provide architectural/engineering services to plan proposed renovations to the American Cave and Karst Education Center and Museum (hiddenrivercave.com) located at 119 East Main Street in Horse Cave, KY. In this three-phase project, Phase 1 involves the Museum applying for an Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) planning grant to fund architectural/engineering design services, and later-phase construction management assistance for renovations to include: A new visitor welcoming pavilion; a shower/changing area in the Museum's basement for use by Hidden River Cave maintenance staff and guests who take off-path cave tours; new museum exhibits in the basement and main floors; and completion of unfinished Museum areas.

Phase 1: A detailed cost estimate and timeline for these design services, around which the planning grant will be compiled. Phase 2: Actual design work, to begin upon ARC planning grant approval and funding release, whereupon the winning firm would be compensated upon completion of design work and a preliminary engineering report (PER), including a detailed Estimate of Probable Cost for the Phase 3 construction process (with construction funded by further ARC grant projects). Proposals should include the architectural/engineering firm's price for these services, as this figure will form the basis of the planning grant proposal.

You are invited to submit a proposal to be received no later than 9:00 am CST on Friday, January 15, 2027. Four copies of your proposal should be submitted to American Cave Conservation Association CEO David Foster, 119 East Main Street, Horse Cave, KY 42749. The Museum's phone number is (270) 786-1466.

This Request for Qualifications/Proposal consists of the following attachments, which can be obtained by contacting Matt Pedigo, Barren River Area Development District, by email at matt.pedigo@bradd.org: or by calling (270) 306-4254. TTY: 1-800-648-6056 (for hearing impaired only).

Attachment A- Problem Statement
Attachment B- Scope of Work
Attachment C- Project Schedule
Attachment D- Contract Type
Attachment E- Proposal Contents
Attachment F- Factors for Award/Evaluation of Criteria
Attachment G- Area Map

The Contract will be awarded to the responsible offerer whose proposal is determined to be the most advantageous to the American Cave Conservation Education Center. The factors to be considered and the method to be utilized in the evaluation of the qualifications and selection of the architect are set forth in Attachment F.

The American Cave and Karst Education Center is an Equal Opportunity Employer. Attention of offerers is particularly called to the requirements as to conditions of employment to be observed under the contract: Section 3, Segregated Facility, Section 109, Title VI, and EEO 11246. Local, minority, and female-owned firms are encouraged to respond.

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