

Mt. Tea State Forest – Upgrade to Pumpkin Ridge Road

Revised: Feb 3, 2026

Brown County Democrat: “[Primitive recreation’: New state forest open in Brown County](#)” by Sara Clifford, August 26, 2020

- Mountain Tea State Forest in Brown County and Ravinia State Forest in Morgan County were officially dedicated as state forests on Aug. 14 — the first new state forests in 67 years, though Mountain Tea was already a little-traveled part of Yellowwood.

Project Timeline – 2022 to Present. [Mt. Tea State Forest: Upgrade Pumpkin Ridge Rd. For the Record](#)

Purpose of the project. To improve access to Mt. Tea State Forest. Current access to Mt Tea is by an unmaintained (by the county) road. A two-lane gravel road providing safe access is a minimum expectation.

- Given the condition of the roadbed, topography, drainage issues, and maintenance challenges, the scope of the needed upgrades is prohibitively expensive for the county.
- The County and Department of Natural Resources (DNR) requested state funding from the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT), which was approved.
- The initial design of the upgraded road met INDOT standards for a primary access road but was not acceptable to county officials, affected property owners, and some residents.
- Changes were made to develop a minimum level of design that INDOT would approve and fund. The road was narrowed from 22 feet to 18 feet and options identified that narrowed construction limits. Changes continue to be discussed to address concerns including ongoing and long-term maintenance costs.
- A final plan requires developing a Preliminary Engineering Report (PER) with an estimated cost of \$1.2 million. This document is used to obtain construction estimates and costs. The estimated construction costs for the “initial” concept were estimated at \$6.5 million.

Project Summary and Overview

1. **History.** [Mountain Tea State Forest](#) currently encompasses more than 1,153 acres, 705 acres of which were deeded **to the State of Indiana in 2013**.
2. **Access.** Mt. Tea is accessible via Pumpkin Ridge Rd, which is less than a mile long. It is an unmaintained (by the county), mostly single-lane road. Residents provide some maintenance. Entrance to the road is by Hoover Road. The sight lines at the intersection require caution when entering and exiting. The intersection has reportedly contributed to many vehicular accidents. One option discussed is to raise the grade of Pumpkin Ridge Rd to improve sightlines.

3. **Condition of the Road.** Due to the poor condition of the road and the lack of a roadbed in many areas, along with the challenges posed by water runoff, insufficient ditching, and culverts, the county could not afford to fund the necessary upgrade. *Borrowing money financed by a property tax increase is not considered a desirable option.*
4. **State Funding Requested and Approved.** Given that Pumpkin Ridge Rd is needed to access a State Forest, the responsibility for maintenance should not be the responsibility of the residents. *(Pumpkin Ridge Rd may be the only unmaintained county road in the State that is used to access a State Forest.* The Board of Commissioners (2022-23), along with DNR, requested state funding from INDOT that was approved by the Governor and Legislature.
 - a. Funds were available to DNR from INDOT for projects requiring improving access via an upgraded road to a recreational area. (Cooperative Recreational Access Road fund).
 - b. Mt. Tea borders Salt Creek Road on the west. Accessing the site from the west via Salt Creek Road would have required a different funding source to obtain permits and funding (if possible) for a new road and bridge through a floodway.

5. Communications

- a. The intent of the previous board of commissioners to request INDOT funding to upgrade Pumpkin Ridge Rd was not communicated to the public. When site surveys began in 2025 and the new commissioners were made aware of the project, public meetings were held to gather citizen feedback.
- b. Unfortunately, the poor communication led to mistrust and skepticism regarding the project's intent, motives, and actions of state agencies (DNR and INDOT) as well as county officials.
- c. Stakeholders also include:
 - i. **Property Owners.** Concern with the scope of change and the impact on their property and quality of life.
 - ii. **Taxpayers** (county and State) expect safe and convenient access to a State Forest, including Mt. Tea. Access via a two-lane road is an expectation.
 - iii. **State agencies:** The governor, the Legislature, INDOT, DNR, and Brown County Government. The county and DNR requested funding, and the state approved the expenditure of INDOT funds.
 - iv. **Visitors and Tourists.** Brown County is the most heavily forested county in the State. The county is also among the most visited. Visitors and tourists are drawn to Brown County for its beauty, federal and state forests, the State Park, and overall, rural environment. Some of these visitors choose to move to Brown County.
 - v. **Future Residents.** Brown County is a bedroom, retirement, and work-from-home community with a tourism focus, where people enjoy the rural environment. Residents provide the major source of the county's revenue through income and property taxes. For example, tourism accounts for \$21 million in gross wages. Taxable wages for all citizens are over \$510 million.

6. Scope and Design of the Upgrade.

- a. The concept for an initial design was purposely broad in scope to ensure adequate funding to cover all risks and contingencies related to the roadbed, drainage, maintenance concerns, and other possible environmental and cultural conditions.
- b. The initial design included a 22-foot-wide paved road with two-foot-wide shoulders designed for 30MPH. The estimated cost was 6.5 million for construction costs (Agreement) and approximately \$1.5 for design and other costs.
 - i. [The Preliminary Engineer Report](#) (PER) is estimated at \$1,210,000. The PER is the final plan that is used to support the request for proposals (RFPs) to construct the road.
 - ii. Initial concept and design. An 8-minute video on the proposed project. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=miLn78JaPik>
- c. Perspective on costs. The PER for upgrading the crossing on Indian Hill Road is estimated at \$400K. The construction costs for a new roadbed just to reduce the elevation to the 100-year-old crossing are estimated at \$1.5 million.
- d. Given feedback from the public, INDOT agreed to identify the *minimum design* the State would approve and fund. This included a road 18 feet wide with 2-foot shoulders and roadside ditches that can remain gravel or be paved. Speed limit reduced to 25 MPH.

7. Road and Property owners (GIS). <https://brownin.wthgis.com/> Type in” Pumpkin Ridge.

- a. Property Owners –Access homes from a private road with an entrance close to the intersection of Hoover/Pumpkin Ridge Rd.
 - i. Klee (47 with an additional 147)
 - ii. Dickmeyer (5.5)
- b. Property Owner – Access to home from Hoover Road.
 - i. Mueller (149) acres.
- c. Property Owners – access from Pumpkin Ridge Rd.
 - i. Olmstead's (10) Property and Home are the closest to the road. A larger buffer will be provided between the pond and the upgraded road.
 - ii. Browning (10) – Property and Home
 - iii. Larson (16) – Property and Cabin
- d. Other Property Owners/Residents. Property not bordering Pumpkin Ridge Rd.
 - i. Tuttle, Owen, Williamson.

8. Property Turnover – Longer-term consideration

- a. Option of doing nothing. Property changes hands. Although some current property owners may prefer minimal change to the existing gravel road, future property owners may have higher expectations for a county road, including a level of service that meets the state's minimum standards and is funded and maintained at minimal cost. A maintained paved road is expected to have lower maintenance costs.

9. **Concerns with DNR.** [DNR has stated that there is no intent to turn Mt Tea State Forest into a state park](#) to attract more visitors, nor to pursue any future road expansion through the Forest. It will remain primitive and support hiking and Hunting. DNR retains the right to log, which it does on any of its properties.

10. **Past Concerns with INDOT.** Given the high maintenance costs and the road's poor condition, county commissioners accepted INDOT funds to upgrade Yellowwood Lake Road to state standards. Given the topography and drainage, a wide area was cleared, which some residents considered excessive and destructive.

- a. In the case of Pumpkin Ridge Rd, INDOT has agreed to a minimal standard that needed INDOT approval. Slopes are narrower; retaining walls/structures can be added; and an agreement has been discussed to replace the trees that had to be removed with white pine as a screen to reduce noise.

11. To Do: Agreement with INDOT

- a. Need a signed agreement to authorize the work needed to develop a PER. This plan is needed to determine costs.
- b. Commissioners serve as the Local Public Agency (LPA) with the Highway Superintendent as the project lead.
- c. Commissioners requested and received a Gantt chart that identifies the project's phases and key points to help coordinate any needed changes and stay within the agreed-upon scope. Although commissioners have review and approval authority, INDOT has the final approval authority, including eminent domain authority. Although eminent domain is expected to be unnecessary and unlikely, the State, *not the county*, assumes all legal costs.
- d. Regarding the need for any additional land, INDOT and Commissioners agreed that only land needed to allow the county to expand the road to two lanes and maintain the road is desired. Temporary easements will be needed during construction. This includes land for a temporary road in some sections to allow vehicular access for residents and visitors to Mt. Tea during construction.

12. **Compensation for Land and Temporary Easement.** Landowners will be compensated for any land (permanent and temporary) needed and improvements such as fencing, gates, and a septic system drainage field. “In other words, the problem that was created as a result of this project is now cured by a cost to replace or cure it.” (Reference: Cost to Cure)