

MOUNT WASHINGTON COMMISSION
January 19, 2024, MINUTES *(Approved 03.22.24)*

A regular meeting of the Mount Washington Commission (MWC) took place at the Franconia Notch State Park Administration Office. Chair Bergeron called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m., with a quorum present. Commission members and attendees introduced themselves.

PRESENT were Chair Ed Bergeron/Public, Vice-chair Rob Kirsch/MWObs, Phil Bryce/Public, Chris Ellms/Public, Carrie Gendreau/Senate; Derek Ibarguen/WMNF, David Paige/House; Wayne Presby/Cog Railway, Sarah Stewart/DNCR Commissioner, Chris Thayer/AMC and Howie Wemyss/Auto Road. Also in attendance were Jack Middleton/Emeritus, Brian Wilson/DPR Director, summit partners and state park staff, and members of the public.

Minutes. Rep Paige made a MOTION to accept the minutes of Nov 17, 2023; seconded by Commr Stewart. The motion to approve the minutes as written PASSED.

Master Plan. Summit Assessment. Commr Stewart said that DNCR received seven submissions to the Assessment RFQ. The selection team includes Mr Kirsch and will interview the top three consultant teams next week. Mr Kirsch said that the consultants offer diverse experiences and perspectives. Dir Wilson added that all the firms recognized the importance of the MWC, and the baseline assessment will include the summit partners. DNCR Public Works Administrator Albi Fioravante offered to provide the MWC with project updates.

Fees paid to the State. Dir Wilson said that Parks had its end-of-season wrap-up meeting for the Special Use Permit program. Program improvements include streamlining the process, post-event evaluations and review of fees. Commr Stewart said that the department is cognizant of the need to balance the growing number of permit requests with providing public access to busy park areas.

Capital Improvements. Dir Wilson reports that there are no new updates since the last meeting.

Park Ops. Park Manager Patrick Hummel and his staff are doing winter maintenance projects, including re-flooring, painting, signage, retail orders, a POS system, and new radios. The Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator position closes on Jan 30th. They are changing their mailing address from the P.O. Box to the Gorham Office location. The new fuel storage tanks will be delivered next month.

Mr Hummel is working with the Bureau of Historic Sites and DNCR's new curator to develop a display plan for the Tip Top House. They found a 1853 Tip Top House visitor log at the State archives office. Commr Stewart suggested that a project work update be given at the MWC September meeting. Mr Presby reminded everyone that such historical information can be added to the App that UNH and the Cog are working on. Members discussed potential fund-raising opportunities and commemorative products featuring the Tip Top House. Other funding sources include the Moose Plate program, grants, and home improvement companies, such as Home Depot and Lowe's.

Mt Washington State Park's planned opening is May 24th. The Cog Railway asked if the park could be opened earlier due to the interest from schools to visit the summit while in session. Members discussed this at length. Mr Hummel expressed concerns regarding operational challenges, variable weather conditions and public safety in early Spring, and off-season project impacts. Could the SAB be partially opened for access to the restrooms and the museum? Dir Wilson replied that the retail and food service operations are essential revenue sources for the park. Mr Wemyss said that the Auto Road opens for the season as soon as they are able. Mr Thayer said that the AMC opens its high elevation huts on June 1st, but that the mid-May Victoria Day weekend brings a lot of hikers to the White Mountains. Mr Ryan Presby provided historical dates of early park openings and Cog attendance during May operations. Mr

Bryce said that Parks has focused more on its costs and operating more efficiently. Mr Ellms asked if the summit attractions would consider subsidizing the park. Mr Wayne Presby said that the Cog has offered assistance to Parks on numerous occasions. Dir Wilson said that logistics are a factor in that the base of park operations is located in Gorham, therefore, access to the summit from the Auto Road side is easier. He said that an early opening is not impossible, but does have its challenges. Mr Bush said that the MWObs has gotten more requests from schools interested in visiting the summit: the school visits are typically short, and students usually bring their own lunch.

Chair Bergeron asked that this item be added to the March agenda and that the summit partners provide additional data and budget considerations. Partners were encouraged to be flexible, creative and equitable.

Leases & Agreements. Dir Wilson said that he will schedule a meeting with the Auto Road to discuss a new lease for their use of the summit parking lots. Parks hired Colin Capelle as Chief of Staff, who comes from the Dept of Admin Services with experience in contract management.

Protection of natural resources. A staff member from the Natural Heritage Bureau is also on the interview panel for the Summit Assessment RFQ. The U.S. Board on Geographical Names has voted to not rename Mount Washington. Mr Bryce had provided members with an example of signage that acknowledges Native American heritage. Dir Wilson added that the Seacoast Science Center includes in its brochure Native American influence and history at Odiorne Point State Park. Mr Hummel said that another resource is First Light, a group working to connect the land conservation movement with Wabanaki communities in ME.

Partner Reports. AMC. Mr Thayer said that winter occupancy activity is trending up from last year and they anticipate the full, post-pandemic return of school groups. AMC is working on its permits and operations plans that are due to the Forest Service. Search and Rescue (SAR) operations were up at 93 calls vs. 87 in 2022. The AMC has recorded 49,281 interactions, up from 36,395 in '22, with 2,780 hikers changing their plans for the better. They had 540 unexpected overnights at their huts due to SAR, up from 391 last year. AMC is working on its partnership agreement with the MWObs and released a blog post on their shared history. Their 2024 trails work includes the Franconia Loop Trails restoration, Ammonoosuc Ravine, Rumney Rocks, Webster Cliff and other AT and ATC projects. The AMC is promoting the February Snow Challenge that encourages community science participation. Their annual meeting is this weekend with 400+ participants in attendance. AMC is completing its 3-year organization strategic plan due out later this year.

Auto Road. General Manager Tobey Reichert reports that the recent heavy rains did not cause major damage. They are addressing the trail system culverts. The Auto Road extended its 2023 operation to Nov 5th, and kept the Auto Road open to tree line. They will do a bridge replacement in April and reconstruct their toll house to improve traffic flow, reseal ditch lines and some re-paving.

Cog Railway. Mr Presby said current work includes locomotive rebuilds, base and Marshfield Station improvements, drainage work, and re-paving their parking lots. Their 2023 season had record ridership in May and October. The Cog Railway is in its 4th winter season runs to Waumbek Station. They would like to offer runs to the summit.

MWObs. Executive Director Drew Bush said that they are submitting a proposal to expand their partnership with NOAA for advanced weather modeling and to be a workforce training ground. MWObs and USFS launched a joint internship program with an intern assigned to the Avalanche Center. Web cameras will be installed at Hermit Lakes in Tuckerman Ravine and at Cannon Mountain by request. They are working with Mr Hummel on SAB maintenance projects, including lighting fixtures,

thermostats and ceiling tiles. MWObs met with DNCR Tom Mansfield to plan for Spring work, including tower drainage, fire egress, storm windows and, possibly, better ventilation. This work was made possible by a generous donor. They are finalizing their contract with AMC to focus on marketing, education, signage and research. Working with the Auto Road and Cog Railway, they have launched the winter school field trips as part of the citizen science Community Snow Observation network. The MWObs is planning for the 2024 Total Solar Eclipse, including hosting NASA’s Citizen CATE Experiment party in Pittsburg, weather forecasting and radiometer measurements of solar radiation. They will also celebrate Big Wind Day’s 90th anniversary in North Conway. They got a lot of good coverage from Fox meteorologist Janice Dean’s recent summit visit and mentioned all the partners.

WMNF. Mr Ibarguen said that they are in winter mode, including the Avalanche Center, ski ops, winter hiking and snowmobile trails. They are responding to the recent storm damage and flooding; and have requested delayed surveying of damages for the Spring. They are also planning for increased visitation during the Solar Eclipse.

AOB. The 2024 MWC meeting schedule is:

January 19, FNSP HQ	May 17	October 18
March 22, Auto Road Visitor Center	June 14, MWObs, No. Conway	November 15, DNCR Gorham Office
April 19, FNSP HQ	September 20, Tip Top House	

Adjourn. The meeting adjourned at 11:50 a.m.

Submitted by T. Tango-Lowy, MWC clerk.