

MOUNT WASHINGTON COMMISSION
May 17, 2024, MINUTES *(Approved on 06.14.24, as amended.)*

A regular meeting of the Mount Washington Commission (MWC) took place at the Omni Mount Washington Hotel in Bretton Woods. Chair Bergeron called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m., with a quorum present. Steve Janicek, the hotel's new Managing Director, welcomed the Commission. The 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; David Paige/House; Ryan Presby for Cog Railway, Sarah Stewart/DNCR Commissioner, Chris Thayer/AMC and Howie Wemyss/Auto Road. Also in attendance were Jack Middleton/Emeritus, Allen Brooks/Counsel for MWC, Drew Bush/MWObs, Patrick Hummel/Mount Washington Park Manager, Albi Fioravante/DNCR Capital Projects Administrator, summit partners and members of the public.

Minutes. Mr Kirsch made a MOTION to accept the minutes of March 22, 2024; seconded by Sen Gendreau. Mr Hummel corrected the minutes: the project contractor went to the ESTP plant in Ontario, not a staff member. The minutes were approved, as amended.

Master Plan. Summit Assessment. Commr Stewart said that the summit assessment contract is being finalized and will be submitted to Governor and Council for approval. Mr Fioravante added that the Statement of Work aligns with the Master Plan, including environmental, facility and operational assessments. The project will involve the MWC at all stages.

Fees paid to the State. Mr Hummel reported that several Special Use Permits are in process and that permits were issued to overnight guide services. Parks collects fees for permitted activities.

Capital Improvements. Mr Hummel provided updates to the capital projects. The wastewater treatment plan is scheduled to be delivered in mid-June. Rock and aesthetic work in and around the new water system will be completed. The new system did well over the winter, despite a lightning strike.

Park Ops. Park staff are preparing for opening on May 24, unless all systems are ready earlier. Improvements were made to the gift shop, food service and first aid areas. A variety of factors affect the opening date, such as staffing, completion of winter repairs and maintenance work, and bringing facility systems fully operational. Mr Hummel will continue to work with summit partners on opening dates. Mr Hummel meets regularly with the DNCR business office to review the park's financials and is working on the FY25 budget.

Members discussed at length hiker issues, including hiker unpreparedness, search and rescue operations, and the recent hiker fatality. Mountain peaks, including Mount Washington, are "attractants." Opening the facilities earlier could cause hikers to make bad decisions. There will always be hikers who attempt to summit, rather than turn back. Fish and Game can seek reimbursement from negligent hikers for search and rescue costs, but could criminal fines be added? The Hampton Beach jetty prompted Parks to file an administrative rule regarding reckless conduct, but its application has not been tested. AMC, WMNF and MWObs provide online hiker weather and safety information and provides hiker outreach programs. Summit partners could increase its communication programs for a consistent message across all channels. Perhaps the public survey assessment could provide insights into how hiker behavior could be changed and ways to improve safety and messaging. Mr Hummel remarked that hikers forget that the summit is the half-way point of their hike.

Negotiation of agreements. Mr Duval reported that the Cog Railway is near completion on their fiber optic project. They plan to connect into the existing conduit and upgrade the fiber optic line at the summit. An agreement with DNCR is being considered.

Promotion of summit. Mr Bryce said that he did not want the MWC to lose sight of the Native American and Indigenous history associated with Mount Washington. Mr Kirsch said that he contacted the faculty of the Native American Program at Dartmouth College and looked into issues relating to local Native American tribes. It is complicated by disputes about who can speak on behalf of any particular tribal community. Rep Paige suggested contacting the First Light organization in Maine.

Commr Stewart said that DNCR's Curator, Jen Widmark, is assisting park staff with the interpretation and exhibits plan for the Tip Top House. A MWC subcommittee (Commr Stewart, Mr Kirsch and Mr Bryce) was formed to review the plans. Mr Brooks advised that meetings be publicly noticed.

Partner Reports. AMC. Mr Thayer reported that the AMC and MWObs have a final agreement for research and educational programs. Occupancy was hindered by winter weather, but lodging reservations are strong and spring opening is on schedule. All huts will be fully operational by May 30, including Lakes of the Clouds. AMC had great response to its solar eclipse activities. It is their 20th anniversary of their alpine monitoring and hiker interface program. AMC and the WMNF are offering trails skills training programs.

Auto Road. Mr Wemyss said that the Auto Road quickly sold out of its Eclipse Tours. The tollhouse and bridge project are underway, and they have completed their base lodge renovations.

Cog Railway. Mr Presby said that the 140 seats available on Eclipse Day also sold out. They are collaborating with MWObs in the Mesonet project. They have hired two UNH mechanical engineering interns and are supporting a UNH senior student Capstone project to develop and test a small "speeder" vehicle that would reach the summit in 20 minutes. The Cog Railway is working on its stormwater and washout management. They are working on an agreement with DNCR to connect into the state's power line at Waumbek Station instead of using propane. They've had a record winter ridership and school tours are up thanks to their partnership with the MWObs. The Cog Railway is planning their 155th anniversary with an Innovation Celebration on September 14th.

MWObs. Mr Bush met with Dir Wilson and Chief of Staff Colin Capelle to discuss the MWObs lease agreement. The MWObs conducted joint medical training and safety planning with park staff and appreciate the cooperation with expanding trip schedules for NH students. He identified several maintenance projects being done by the Observatory, including bunk room and storm windows, tower drainage, ventilation, thermostats/light fixtures and tiles in the weather station. The MWObs and USFS supported an intern at the Avalanche Center. The MWObs will be launching weather station tours thanks to partnerships with the Auto Road and Cog Railway. Five new weather stations will be installed in partnership with the Cog and also partly funded by a grant from the Northern Border Regional Commission. In contract with the AMC, they are working to expand the Mesonet system and the Northeast Snow Survey data collection. They finalized their contract with the US Air Force to become a long-term weather testing site and will continue to pursue research opportunities with the Army Corps of Engineers Cold Regions Research Engineering Laboratories. Mr Bush thanked the partners for the joint efforts during the Eclipse and thanked Rep Paige for his remarks at their Big Wind Day celebration. They were awarded grants in connection with three foundation proposals for educational programs, and will work with the Auto Road and Cog Railway on school field trips. June 1st is their Annual Meeting at the McAuliffe-Shepard Discovery Center. Seek the Peak is on July 20th with a variety of events and activities.

WMNF. Mr Ibarguen agreed that the summit partners have built a momentum of collaboration. The WMNF is starting its season with a stronger workforce and faster start. They assisted NH Fish and Game in the search and rescue effort for the missing hiker. The WMNF will be conducting prescribed burns near Crawford Notch if conditions allow. The Recreation Symposium held last week was well attended. Common issues for the industry include workforce, housing, infrastructure, and funding.

AOB. Commr Stewart said that the unveiling of the Christa McAuliffe statue located at the State House ground is on September 2nd. Chair Bergeron said that UNH has the largest undergraduate research program in the nation and that he took part in the Senior Capstone Project program.

The 2024 MWC meeting schedule is:

January 19, FNSP HQ	May 17, Omni Mt Washington Hotel	October 18, ???
March 22, Auto Road Visitor Center	June 14, MWObs Offices, No. Conway	November 15, DNCR Gorham Office
April 19, <i>Cancelled</i>	September 20, Tip Top House	

Adjourn. The meeting adjourned at 11:45 a.m.

Submitted by T. Tango-Lowy, MWC clerk.