

MOUNT WASHINGTON COMMISSION
October 18, 2024, MINUTES *(Approved 11.15.24)*

A regular meeting of the Mount Washington Commission (MWC) took place at the AMC Pinkham Notch Visitor Center, Joe Dodge Lodge. Vice-chair Kirsch called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m., with a quorum present.

PRESENT were Vice-chair Rob Kirsch/MWObs, Phil Bryce/Public; Chris Ellms/Public, Carrie Gendreau/Senate; Josh Sjostrom for WMNF; David Paige/House; Wayne Presby/Cog Railway; Dir Brian Wilson for DNCR, Chris Thayer/AMC and Howie Wemyss/Auto Road.

Also in attendance were Drew Bush/MWObs; Ryan Presby and Earl Duval/Cog Railway, Patrick Hummel/Mt Washington State Park Manager, Albi Fioravante/DNCR Capital Projects Administrator, summit partners and members of the public. Tighe&Bond consultants present were Joe Persechino, Vesna Maneva and Stephanie Tetreault.

Minutes. Sen Gendreau made a MOTION to accept the minutes of September 20, 2024; seconded by Mr Wemyss. The minutes were approved as written, with one abstention.

Master Plan. Dir Wilson said that the Visitor Experience Survey will continue to the next season and a statewide public opinion survey is to come. Tighe&Bond made its presentation to the MWC and responded to the MWC's questions throughout the meeting. The presentation slides will be posted on the Parks website. The project team consists of Tighe&Bond as the prime consultant, LDa Architecture & Interiors as the building assessment consultant, Biohabitats as the alpine flora consultant, UNH Survey Center as the visitor survey consultant, and The Green Engineer as the sustainability consultant. The core team is collaborating with DNCR project staff with additional input from Fish and Game, Natural Heritage Bureau and DES. The MWC serves as part of the public engagement process along with summit visitors and the greater community.

The project's foundation is based on the Master Plan goals: maintaining a high-quality visitor experience that respects the unique qualities of the summit; active stewardship of the state park's ecology, facilities, and history; and, consciously aligning the capacities of the environment and infrastructure with the number of visitors. The Scope of Work consists of the Visitor Survey, the Environmental Assessment, and the Facilities Assessment.

The survey work includes a visitor experience survey that is distributed at the summit and a statewide public opinion survey distributed to the Granite State Panel that will help determine the broader public sentiment for summit investments. The UNH Survey Center has recommended that the visitor experience survey be concentrated to those visitors at the summit rather than a wider audience. As an incentive, Parks is offering respondents with a chance to win one of 15 \$100 gift cards. The public opinion survey questions will be shared with the MWC.

The Environmental Assessment includes an examination of environmental contamination, a natural resources assessment, and a facilities assessment. The environmental contamination work includes a review of historical and existing records, a visual reconnaissance and an initial findings letter with recommendations for further investigations. The natural resources assessment will look at the physical, biological and ecological integrity similar to a Level 2 Rapid Field Assessment. "Edge impacts" investigates the level of disturbance occurring 500-ft. off the boundaries. Climate change and the potential impacts on flora and wildlife will also be considered. The findings will take into account the balance between summit improvements environmental restoration goals. Mr Kirsch suggested that Tighe&Bond contact Jack Middleton, who has served on the MWC since the beginning and has broad institutional knowledge and knowledge of developments on Mount Washington. Mr Kirsch noted he had identified Mr Middleton and others who should be contacted to provide information on contamination around the summit in an email to Mr Fiorante and the Tighe&Bond team weeks ago. It was pointed out that the Environmental Assessment is a critical focus of the Master Plan, and that future developments on the summit are to proceed with no further damage to the environment and restoring earlier conditions, when practicable. And decisions to assess whether such damage or improvement will occur will be based on the Assessment. Recommendations to Tighe&Bond for additional subject-matter experts should be sent to Mr Fioravante.

Components of the Facilities Assessment include building infrastructure, fuel tanks, stormwater management, and the visitor experience related to circulation and accessibility, scenic experiences and views, amenities, wayfinding and signage. The targeted project timeline spans July 2024 through December 2025.

The Visitor Survey was launched in September and the Public Opinion Survey is in development. For the environmental site inventory, existing records have been reviewed and the visual reconnaissance is done. The site inventory of natural resources was completed. The review of records and the visual inventory has been done as part of the facilities inventory.

Mr Bryce asked about the evolving space and infrastructure needs for the Yankee Building and the Sherman Adams Building (SAB). The report recommendations will provide goals-based scenarios and options for operations and the facilities. Rep Paige stressed the importance of advocating for the support of legislature and public opinion. Mr Thayer asked about the site circulation visit considering how crowds can fluctuate throughout the day.

Sen Gendreau asked about archeological information and the summit's importance to the Native American community. Mr Kirsch responded that he, Mr Bryce and MWObs Curator Dr Peter Crane are looking into the history and importance of the summit to the Native American community and will provide an update at a future meeting. Dir Wilson said that archeological surveys are often done during a project planning phase and that the DNCR has a framework for such surveys. Mr Wemyss and Mr Ellms suggested that adding an initial phase archeological survey may be helpful. Dir Wilson responded that DNCR has some technical expertise through the Division of Historical Resources. Mr Fioravante will look into whether DNCR has any archeological findings on file. Mr Kirsh concluded that the summit assessment work will provide a foundation for all future planning and management and that the MWC serves as a key resource for the project team.

Fees paid to the State. Dir Wilson said that the Special Use Permit program final report is still in review and its findings will be provided at the next meeting.

Capital Improvements. Mr Hummel reported that staff are fine-tuning the operation of the new sewage treatment plant. A technician from the manufacturer is making a site visit next week to provide more training in preparation for winter operations.

Park Ops. Mr Hummel said that this is the final week of summer operations. Weather disruptions, including 17.5" of snowfall this month, has caused full closures and logistical challenges. He thanked the Cog Railway for their help with park staff shift changes when weather made the roadway was impassable.

Negotiation of agreements. Dir Wilson apologized to the Auto Road for the delay in DNCR's response regarding the lease of the summit parking lots. DNCR will extend the current lease as written for one additional year while the parties continue to negotiate for a new lease. Mr Presby expressed concern about the provisions of the lease that has remained relatively unchanged for over 50 years. Dir Wilson said that the Master Plan will serve as a guiding document for agreements with the intent to support the State Park and to recognize its partnerships.

Mr Presby said that the Cog Railway and Bretton Woods Telephone completed the installation of the fiber optic line along the track to the summit in June, but that the State has yet to finalize its contract with Bretton Woods Telephone to connect and operate the fiber optic network at the summit. Dir Wilson acknowledged the delay and said that the contract is still being reviewed by DNCR's Communications Bureau, Business Office and legal counsel. Mr Presby expressed frustration with the delay.

Promotion of summit. Dir Wilson reported that the current Div of Travel and Tourism Development (DTTD) is retiring. He will ask the in-coming DTTD director and Dir Jannel Lawton of the Outdoor Recreation Industry Development office to speak at a future MWC meeting.

Partner Reports. AMC. Mr Thayer said that this is the last weekend for several of the AMC huts and lodges. A few huts and lodges will remain open under reduced, self-service operations as well as the backcountry campsites. AMC has had a strong summer and fall, and is up 5% year over year. AMC is hosting the Waterman Fund Northeastern Alpine Stewardship gathering at the Highland Center on Oct 25-27, that encourages the stewardship of alpine ecosystems. AMC has developed its new logo and brand.

Auto Road. Mr Wemyss said that the Columbus Day weekend brought huge crowds, especially on Friday. Due to inclement weather, the Auto Road was open only to the halfway mark last weekend and visitors were discouraged from walking up to the summit as the facilities were closed. Their bridge project is complete. The new tollhouse is almost done, as is the solar array field that will provide nearly all the power needed for the hotel.

Cog Railway. Ryan Presby reiterated that the State’s contracting process has been slow and difficult. He reported that visitors have kept coming despite the weather impacts. The Cog has had to limit its capacity to the summit, reduce schedules and mitigate impacts to staff. Operations will continue to Oct 27th and will shut down for two weeks for maintenance and track replacement. The Cog Railway will resume operations to Waumbek Station on Nov 9th.

MWObs. Mr Bush thanked the Cog Railway for providing transportation to staff for shift changes. The MWObs was recognized by the NH Senate and Mr Bush thanked Sen Gendreau, Sen Rosenwald and Senate President Bradley for their support. Research projects include the testing of weather instruments for the U.S. Air Force and looking into a NH Clean Energy grant for demonstration batteries that could serve as a backup power source for the summit. They are talking to AMC and DES about air quality monitoring on the regional Mesonet and are collaborating with Northeastern University on proposals designed to better communicate and visualize weather forecasts for the purpose of more effectively informing visitors of weather awareness and safety.

Their proposal for an expanded partnership with the National Weather Service (NWS) and the National Mesonet Program was included in the FY2025 Congressional Budget. The MWObs and the NWS in Gray, ME are working on a joint internship through Howard University. The MWObs is considering candidates for the joint internship research position with AMC and USFS and is seeking a science communication intern. They will work with summit partners on winter operations and school field trips. Maintenance projects include replacement of storm windows, new thermostats, improved drainage in the tower, repair of light fixtures and new ceiling tiles. Granite State Glass developed a prototype window for the bunk room that will improve ventilation and egress for both Observatory and State Park personnel, a critical fire safety improvement. As part of the effort to promote the summit, Mr Bush visited Blue Hill Observatory in MA, the oldest weather observatory in the nation. He also visited Fox Weather for potential partnership opportunities. Thanks to the Cog, all five Mesonet stations are up.

Townsquare Media. Mr Hummel reported that he assisted Mr Scamman with the installation of the new WHOM transmitter. The WHOM building has been winterized, but, as mentioned by Mr Scamman at the last meeting, the building needs to be replaced. Mr Hummel said that the summit assessments will help with understanding the impacts of a new building.

WMNF. Mr Sjostrom said that the Avalanche Center is open with much of the staff returning. Due to the budget, there will be less hiring and tight scheduling from Dec through June. The Glen Ellis reconstruction project is scheduled for completion next spring. Campgrounds are shutting down and the WMNF is ready for off-season operations.

AOB. The next MWC meeting is scheduled for November 15, 2024, at 10 a.m. at the DNCR Gorham Office.

The proposed 2025 MWC meeting schedule is:

January 24, Franconia Notch State Park, Park HQ	May 16, TBD	October 17, TBD
March 14, TBD	June 13, TBD	November 14, DNCR Gorham Office
April 11, TBD	September 12, Tip Top House	

Adjourn. The meeting adjourned at 12:05 p.m.

Submitted by T. Tango-Lowy, MWC clerk.