

MOUNT WASHINGTON COMMISSION
February 19, 2021 MINUTES (approved on 04/23/21)

A regular meeting of the Mount Washington Commission (MWC) was held by videoconference.

Call to Order. Chairman Bradley called the meeting to order at 1:02 p.m. and read the *Checklist to ensure meetings are compliant with the Right-to-Know law during the State of Emergency*. PRESENT by roll call were Ed Bergeron/for Public, Sen Jeb Bradley/Senate, Dir Phil Bryce/Div Parks and Rec, Paul Cunha/AMC, Paul Fitzgerald/for Public, Diane Taliaferro/WMNF, Paul Ingersoll/for Public, Jack Middleton/MWObs, Wayne Presby/Cog Railway, Rep Karen Umberger/House, and Howie Wemyss/Auto Road. Rep Umberger was welcomed back to the Commission. Paul Fitzgerald/for Public arrived later during the meeting.

Also known to be in attendance were Allen Brooks/AG Office for MWC, Donna Dunn/MWObs Interim Exec. Director, Michael Haley/AG Office for DNCR, Patrick Hummel/MWSP, Prof. Tim Lewis/Northern VT University, Ryan Presby/Cog Railway, Seth Prescott/DNCR, Tobey Rechert/Auto Road, Edith Tucker/Berlin Sun, and Torene Tango-Lowy/MWC clerk.

Minutes. Mr Middleton MOVED to accept the minutes of Jan 29, 2021; SECONDED by Rep Umberger. The minutes were APPROVED as written by roll call YES vote by Mr Bergeron, Sen Bradley, Dir Bryce, Mr Cunha, Mr Fitzgerald, Mr Ingersoll, Mr Middleton, Mr Presby, Ms Taliaferro, Rep Umberger and Mr Wemyss.

Capital Improvements. Mr Prescott reported that the ventilation equipment plans had been reviewed by the state and MWObs. Ms Dunn added that she met with Tom Mansfield and the project engineers and the ventilation equipment will be purchased in the next week and installed in time for opening. Mr Prescott said that the design plans for the sewage treatment is near completion. Mr Hummel said the LWCF program has been reinstated to its original project criteria, including state-side funding.

State Park Report & Operating Plan Review. Mr Hummel had no new updates on a 2021 operations plan: he is watching for new COVID guidance that would be incorporated into the plan. The retail manager position has been filled. Mr W Presby offered use of the Cog to transport park staff up to the summit, if being able to commute from the west-side of the mountain would help.

Parks is considering egress alterations to increase the SAB capacity from 315 to 500. The estimated cost is \$150K, with construction starting at the end of summer. Parks will work with the Cog and Auto Road for early season operational needs. Mr Hummel responded to Rep Umberger that the alterations were not due to a short-term COVID response, but to allow for a maximum capacity needed for the busiest days/times of the season. Mr W Presby wondered if the state could exempt the SAB from fire marshal's restrictions, even if temporarily, through legislation and under the protections of sovereign immunity. Dir Bryce said Parks has paid out for injuries; the master planning effort and compliance with code standards are important. Mr W Presby said that tourism is an important economic driver for the North Country, and that the summit partners have invested in their operations and in promoting the summit. Dir Bryce agreed and the state has also made investments on the summit. Chair Bradley asked that Parks provide the MWC with updates about the egress project and whether project funding needs to be included in HB 2 or the Capital Budget.

Admission fee. Chair Bradley spoke to Commissioner Stewart and they concluded that a fee for the 2021 season would be difficult to implement, but that the fee discussions were valuable. Strategic thinking and completion of the master plan, including an understanding of the financial support needed at the summit and the role of the summit partners should continue. Rep Umberger said that with the state's current situation, the Fiscal Committee is unlikely to approve a new fee for the summit at this time. Mr Wemyss suggested having the Fiscal Committee tour the summit operations. In the interim, donations could be encouraged and Mr W Presby said he could add a donation link to Parks on the Cog website, as he has done for the Obs. Mr Fitzgerald wished to go on record that the admission fee was a

reasonable solution and was disappointed that it would not move forward. Chair Bradley said the fee discussion is not over, only suspended for a 2021 season start. Both Chair Bradley and Rep Umberger said DNCR needs to be prepared for updates to its HB 2 operational budget and its capital budget as there may be additional federal stimulus funding available.

Master Plan. Mr Hummel had no new information to report on the communications facility project.

Partner Reports. AMC. Mr Cunha said that they are watching the trends under COVID. They are taking hut reservations.

Cog Railway. Mr W Presby said that they are in winter operations with good demand. They are completing construction on their new maintenance facility.

MWObs. Ms Dunn reported that they are working on hiring plans and staff protections under COVID.

WMNF. Ms Taliaferro said the avalanche center is seeing an increase in backcountry skiing by inexperienced and unprepared skiers. The Interior Department will be focusing on rural economic development, equity and inclusion, climate and the environment, drought and fire activity. A core WMNF project is a snowmobile corridor.

AOB. Mr R Presby asked by what authority the state had to enter into agreements outside of the state's disposition and acquisition bidding process. Mr Brooks said that agencies are granted certain contracting authority, but that he would need to research the statutes further.

The next meeting is scheduled for April 23, 2021, at 9 a.m. at Cannon's Peabody Lodge, if possible, or by videoconference. The agenda will include an update on the SAB doors and 2021 operation plans.

Adjourn. Mr Middleton MOVED to adjourn; SECONDED by Mr Bergeron. The meeting adjourned at 3:45 p.m. by unanimous vote.

Submitted by T. Tango-Lowy, MWC clerk.