

MOUNT WASHINGTON COMMISSION (MWC)

“MASTER PLAN SESSION” NOTES

December 13, 2013, AMC Highland Center

Members present: Walter Graff/AMC, Dir. Phil Bryce/Div Parks and Rec, Mark Ericson/Townsquare Media, Paul Fitzgerald/Public, Jake Lubera/WMNF, Martha McLeod/Public, Jack Middleton/MWObs, Rep. Karen Umberger/NH House, Howie Wemyss/Auto Road

Others present: Rachael Stuart/Stuart Consulting, Scot Henley/MWObs, Mike Pelchat/MW State Park, Gail Scott/Berlin Daily Sun, Edith Tucker/Coos County Democrat

Today’s session is primarily a conversation of the MWC, but the Master Plan (MP) is expected to have public input.

Review of statutory responsibilities for the MP and alignment with the State Park Strategic Plan (SP Plan). Statutory role of MWC to manage building and lands owned by the State.

Mt Washington (MW) is complex and requires coordination of summit partners. See 1970 MP statement (p.11).

Three themes

Bryce: a) Subject matters are the same as in the 1970 MP (water, capital projects, carrying capacity, flora/fauna); commonality between MW MP and SP Plan – capital investment needs within the park system and MW capital needs; b) productive partnerships (private, public, NPOs) with common goals; c) the importance of recreation to the economy (see SCORP, MW MP), therefore the importance of capital investments.

Rep. Umberger: a) Cooperation by partners – few areas for public-private cooperation as found with the MWC; b) capital investment – may not have done all we can, but vision for future (20 years out) will determine what needs to be done.

McLeod: Review of 1970 MP highlights the passing of time; a) Resources – state/public benefits, b) Management of resources, c) Balance – cooperation/conflict between summit uses (RS: “creative tension”).

Erickson: Noted the cooperation between stakeholders; Onsite cooperation is stellar, especially following the summit fire; Perhaps more external cooperation – build a better tourist experience on the summit based upon the concept of “adventure,” such as what the Auto Road, Cog and Obs edutrips provide.

Graff: The challenge/opportunity of the summit as a finite resource; the importance of protecting the summit, the environment and the landscape; What is the visitor experience in 10-15-20 years? (RS: the summit is “in trust” to the MWC); What is a sustainable carrying capacity? In 1970, 50% of summit visitors were hikers – now? Easier access to the summit via the Auto Road and Cog has helped change the visitorship.

Lubers: Mt Washington is a unique recreational opportunity with a fragile environment; Changes in use, based upon scientific and recreation-based research, will determine the management needs for the future in for this hostile but fragile environment.

Wemyss: The only reason for the facilities at the summit is to serve the public, which requires protecting the resource; All entities may have a different bottom line, but we need to work out any potential conflicts; Finite resources and growing use may result in not delivering a good guest experience on the summit.

Middleton: The issue is how to provide a good experience now and into the future; Currently, the summit seems mobbed; Capital costs for building in such a hostile environment will be high, e.g. Harvey Construction estimated \$2 mil for the summit building, but the final cost was \$4.5 mil., spending years on solving issues with the windows and septic; Increased visitation requires the need to provide a meaningful experience; Changes in the timing of visits, such as later in the season or visits by skiers, and how to fund such changes will need to be addressed.

Fitzgerald: How to care for and manage the summit with limited resources is a constant theme; It's wrong to require the Parks Division to turn a profit, making it a difficult environment to work within; Cooperation among partners exists, but also conflict and conflict resolution, e.g. the proposed sunset of the MWC; the MWC allows conservation among the partners to occur; Many in legislature were not aware of Mt Washington, that it was a state park, or that the MWC exists; An educational mission needed.

Rep. Umberger: Phil has helped to move the MWC forward. (RS: Importance of listening to each other, to understand how others are thinking.)

Pelchat: Gave a presentation on summit infrastructure needs. The list included: Concrete repairs to SAB (2014); Tip Top House entry renovation (2014); Waste water monitoring wells, ESTP O&M update and plant modifications (2014); SAB entryway design (2014); SAB entryway upgrade phase I (2015); Potable water system upgrade and SAB heating plants upgrade (2016-17); Additional restrooms?; Handicap access to viewing deck?; Additional SAB seating?; Tank farm removal and fuel storage upgrades?; Fire detection and suppression for all buildings?; Summit interpretive-nature trail?; Garage and storage at base?; SAB entryway upgrade phase II? Landswap "Alpine Garden" for "Homestretch" with WMNF? The summit sees 300K visitors with 2-5K/day.

This information was helpful. Rep. Umberger liked the interpretive-nature trail idea as visitors may not understand the value/enticement of the summit and its overall offerings. It would be helpful to know the capital project plans of the partners to coordinate summit offerings and infrastructure needs.

Threats (external forces)

Managing the number of people; Aging infrastructure; Safety-weather related danger; Legal requirements of environmental regulations (sewage treatment plant, tank farm); Life-safety issues; Economic environment and funding; State funding for park system; Infrastructure and operations; Tourism economy and industry – the overall health/stress for all partners; Profile of Mt Washington – positive or negative? More people, more impacts – need for balance; Impacts to business and the public; Hiker need to use facilities when closed; Off-season use; Increased search and rescue incidents with changing weather

patterns; Increase number of people who lack preparation; Overall deterioration of buildings; Visitor use and experience; Recent increase in military training.

Opportunities (external forces)

Location – one of the most scenic mountain vistas; Improving the visitor experience, such as the new museum; Mt Washington as a NH icon absent the Old Man of the Mountain; Marketing done by the partners, White Mtn Attractions that benefits the park; Shared vision/goals for the summit; Educating consumers; Improved restaurant/gift shop; Investment into the interpretive experience; Tours of the summit; (RS: How to capture the value of the experience, the strategy for the “summit”); International marketing and visitors; Technology for communications and interpretation.

Who is the customer?

Strengths/Weaknesses

Proximity to large populations; Value of weather reporting for the public and aviation; Surrounding resources (USFS/WMNF); MWC is well known for its public-private partnerships (RS: “reputation”); Mt Washington range; WMNF known for its recreational opportunities; Parks is woefully underfunded and has many infrastructure needs; Park system is an icon of the state, but needs financial backing; Legislature values Parks making money, but then takes revenue away (e.g. \$50K transferred to NH Fish and Game search and rescue and \$500K transferred to the State Park Fund from Cannon revenues); Parks has flexibility and control over the Mt Washington Fund, which is separate from and does not contribute to the State Park Fund; Need to make the case for summit capital budget projects (e.g. \$14.5 mil Hampton Beach project was based upon a strong MP with business support and lobbying); Leverage partners “good will;” Creative ideas (e.g., Obs lease payments to the State is helped by Auto Road/Cog contributions to Obs.

Next Steps

Focus on carrying capacity; Improving the visitor experience; Be Bold, but solve the issues – “Vision” for the summit; Manage off summit access points; Interpretive experience; Once Vision/Needs are determined – Go to legislature for funding; Rigorous engineering, design and plans are needed; Legislature has been supportive of Parks.

Bryce: Two levels of next steps – a) Infrastructure and compliance issues; b) the Future – Where do we really want to go from here? What does it look like? This will determine the information needed and the options.

Capital improvements over a ten year period based upon “what for?” decisions; Documents written for specific audience; Strategy – be ready to move when the opportunity arises; Educate legislature – What the partners are providing; the public-private partnerships; Private funding.

Much talk, need to act. Make the economic case for the North Country.

Move forward as a group or as a subcommittee? Hire for data collection and trends? Long-term vision – pros and cons of options.

Need to continue this conversation, including more on infrastructure and future needs; think through the political pathways; Create the context for the next capital budget cycle, based on a 10 year vision

Wemyss will look into the Pikes Peak, CO planning effort for things we should consider.

Tucker: AMC economic report on the Hut System? Need comprehensive info on economic impacts of tourism and spending in Coos County.

Next meeting will be scheduled for January.