



# Renewable Juneau

TO: US Forest Service

RE: Response to scoping letter about proposed Mendenhall Glacier facility improvements

Date: January 5, 2021

Renewable Juneau submits the following comments in response to your proposed changes to facilities at the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area. We support the careful analysis you are conducting of the significant effects these facility changes will incur. Our previous comments on this project still stand but we feel the need to clarify our position on several specific points made in your recent scoping letter. Below are extracts from that letter with our responses.

## **Transportation – Parking and Access - expansion:**

- This proposal has minimal change since the scoping period held in early 2020. Layout (design) of the parking spaces has shifted but the general location and size of the proposed lot remains the same.
- The two existing parking areas nearest the Visitor Center would be combined and the layout updated to provide more parking than currently exists as well as create separation between commercial and private vehicles.

This is a primary problem in that your proposal still prioritizes the expansion of parking spaces over reducing traffic congestion and minimizing effects to wetlands. We continue to prefer vehicle parking in a remote area instead of at the best viewpoint at the end of the road near a salmon stream. At a minimum your proposal will bury wetlands under rock, create more urban noise along the Steep Creek walkways and threaten the waters with oily waste from engines. But you are also missing an opportunity to demonstrate that exceptional experiences and resources are more important than convenience and that efficient, renewable-energy powered public transit is good for everyone. A circulating electric tram from a remote parking lot solves this problem and has already received initial design work. Another possibility is to use circulating electric buses from the docks, perhaps in partnership with CBJ, which would allow parking at the end of the road to be reconstructed without expansion.

## **Facility – Welcome Center Complex - new:**

- This proposal not changed from the scoping period held in early 2020.
- The existing pavilion, parking area shelters, and kiosks would be replaced with a new single story, 18,000 square-foot Welcome Center near the main parking area.
  - Design is ongoing and is considering needs and possibilities for interpretive programs, administrative use (both agency and partner offices), food service, maintenance and storage.

Nowhere in your design criteria do you mention prioritizing energy efficiency in this new Welcome Center complex and the buildings it will contain. You mention needs

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for the design to include interpretation, office space, food and maintenance, but nothing about the consideration of renewable energy as an organizing theme. While we realize that scoping letters can't explain all design elements in detail, especially those that are still in progress, we are quite worried that you are losing an opportunity to design these buildings and paved areas around a core need to interpret climate change in a realistic way, before a glacier that is rapidly disappearing.

## **Facility – Visitor Center - expansion:**

- This proposal has minimal change since the scoping period held in early 2020. Deferred maintenance items to the access trail and hand railing, and a new covered area outside main doors were added to the proposed action.
- The existing Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center would be expanded to improve visitor circulation, and interior spaces would be reconfigured to meet staff needs. Improvements to the Visitor Center would include expansion of the upper (exhibit) floor, a defined theatre queuing space, and expanded restrooms.

It's encouraging to know the exhibit floor of the Visitor Center will be expanded but why is there no mention of including a new exhibit about glacier science and climate change? This has already been designed at considerable cost by a team of experts in 2019?

- Commercial (guided) boats on the lake would be allowed under special use authorization with the following stipulations:
  - a maximum capacity of 49 passengers each;
  - use of alternative energy or low-emissions motors (no on-site fuel storage allowed) with a maximum decibel rating; and
  - a top operating speed to create no or minimal wake.

Use of "alternative energy" motors on boats doesn't go far enough in describing the need for electric motors. What other alternatives are you considering, gas turbines? Juneau residents are wary of this proposal and you should be assuring us that boats will be completely non-polluting and quiet as well as low-speed.

## ***What Preliminary Issues Have Been Identified?***

Two preliminary issues were identified a previous a result of the scoping efforts last spring:

- 1) Proposed developments and increased visitation could cause visual impacts; disturb area fish and wildlife, particularly bears, nesting birds, migratory birds, and fish; and create increased human-bear interactions; and
- 2) Increased visitation, particularly in areas that have lower use currently, would negatively impact user experience through increased encounters and larger group sizes.

These two issues are clearly important but you've also missed outlining a key issue. We believe that climate change is dramatically changing the ecology and human experience of the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area (and the world) and

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it's imperative to demonstrate solutions that do not burn fossil fuels and do not contribute greenhouse gases to our atmosphere. Framed in a positive way, the Forest Service has the opportunity to set a new course for a new time, a time in which renewable energy is a positive, organizing theme for our future.

Sincerely,

Margo Waring  
Board President, Renewable Juneau

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