



Despite howling winds and plenty of slush, dozens of people attended a scoping open house in February 2020 at the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center. (Ben Hohenstatt / Juneau Empire File)

# Opinion: Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area proposal is a head-scratcher

Now's the time to speak out.

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**By Ken Post**

Imagine you lived in a neighborhood and the city changed the zoning next door to accommodate a much higher level of use. Five years later, the city decides to increase the levels again. Would you be upset and frustrated? Most likely. That is exactly what the Forest Service is proposing for the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area. The driving force behind this proposal is the 2019 Mendenhall Glacier Master Plan and its Touch the Glacier goal

where “both visitors and residents have the opportunity to experience glacial ice, either up close or from afar, as their abilities and time allow.” Translation: the Forest Service is rezoning the area in the vicinity of the old ice caves, and much of the commercial visitor use will be heading to the northwest corner of the lake.

I know what people will say: I’m anti-tourism. I wasn’t anti-tourism when use in the MGRA was 100,000 visitors, or 200,000 visitors or the 490,600 people who used the visitor center in 2019. Now, I’m scratching my head wondering when this is going to stop.

First, let’s take a look at the numbers. In 2015, the capacity for the “Visitor Center Unit” (primarily the visitor center and a host of trails on the east side of the lake) was 485,000 “visits” (about 95% allocated to commercial use). The new proposal has a capacity of 999,217 visits (95% allocated to commercial use).

Let’s drill down a bit further. In 2015, the total capacity for the entire West Glacier Unit (the west side of the lake) was 150,552 visits with 33% allocated to commercial use (about 50,000 visits). In just five years, the proposed total capacity would be 368,682 with 80% allocated to commercial use (295,000 visits). This 590% (295,000/50,000 visits) increase in commercial use will primarily take place on a much smaller subset of acreage — the old ice caves area at the northwest portion of the lake. This area will be “rezoned” and the Forest Service refers to this area as the new “Remote Glacier Visitor Area,” now a subunit of the Visitor Center Unit.

So how will all these visitors get to this new remote area? They’ll likely be riding in boats with up to 50 passengers and disembarking at the gravel beach where a few kayakers occasionally land. At the proposed capacity, and on an average day, the boats will make approximately 40 round trips daily with 2,000 people going ashore each day from May 1 to Sept. 30. Once they get ashore, there will be a hardened accessible trail, a restroom facility and four seasonal, re-locatable structures.

Interestingly, the same master plan states that one of the “themes” of the plan “is to protect the spaces that Juneau residents use...” I’m at a loss at how this proposal protects the space at the northwest portion of the lake. If

you're also wondering, now's the time to speak out.

There's a lot more in the proposal that I haven't the space to touch on here. If any of this concerns you, check out the project website at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/project?project=53780> www.fs.usda.gov/project?project=53780. Specific comments should be sent via email to [comments-alaska-tongass-juneau@usda.gov](mailto:comments-alaska-tongass-juneau@usda.gov) with "MGRA Project" in the subject line. Your comments are due by Jan. 15.

• *Ken Post has been a Juneau resident since 1979. He worked for the Forest Service in Juneau and retired in 2018. Columns, My Turns and Letters to the Editor represent the view of the author, not the view of the Juneau Empire. Have something to say? [Here's how to submit a My Turn or letter.](#)*

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