Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Facility Improvement Project

Draft environmental Impact Statement

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Facility Improvement Project. I was a tour operator on the Mendenhall Glacier, and the Juneau Ice Field for over 25 years, and feel a great affinity for that wonderful place. And I want to see it continue to be a place of wonder and joy for all those that come to be amazed. It is obvious, with the increase in cruise ship visitors that improvements need to be made in order to accommodate those visitors, as well as independent travelers and locals.

The most significant proposed change, are the alternatives that would establish gas/diesel or electric motorized boats to transport visitors from the current visitor center to the west side of the lake to provide access to the retreating glacier. While I understand the intent to provide visitors a more intimate experience with the glacier, there are boat safety issues that have not been adequately addressed, as evidenced by earlier comments regarding USCG requirements, lack of navigation charts, standard safety protocols, pollution risk and the need to dreg the lake. While I am not an expert in any of these areas they seem like legitimate concerns that need to be addressed.

My specific concern is with the effect those boats would have on the vast majority of visitors that come to the to see the glacier. While the glacier is the main attraction, it is also the mountains and the land scape that has been carved by the glacier. With two boats, crisscrossing the lake throughout the day, carrying just a small percentage of the people that come to see the glacier, the vast majority will be watching the boats go back and forth, instead of just the incredible natural setting. With the glacier retreating as quickly as it has been in recent time, access is becoming more difficult and dangerous, as evidenced by the ice cave collapse last year. The vast majority of visitors that come to see the Mendenhall Glacier are cruise ship passengers, that are on a ship every day, for 7- 10 days. And every one of those ships stops at a tide water glacier providing a full on, frontal view of a massive wall of ice. The last thing they need is another boat trip, especially one that is an intrusion to the vast majority of visitors on shore. For those that do want to go to the area by the toe of the glacier, there are non-motorized, Forest Service permitted, boat operators that provide a non-invasive trip to the area at the toe of the glacier. Those operations should be facilitated with the basic infrastructure they need. If the West Glacier Visitor Area is developed, get rid of the pods! They look like they are part of a Martian space station. Surely there is a better solution! Might I suggest something? Like shelters that replicate an Ice Field research station, or Mt. Everest Base Camp, minus the trash.

Trail upgrades are important and necessary to addressing the increased visitation, and I support the extensive plan to improve and expand tails. The new purposed Lake Shore Trail is important because it provides a new trail system that accesses the lake shore line and will help disperse crowds and provide views across the lake to the glacier. I don’t however support the proposal to make those trails 14 feet wide. That is not a trail, it is a country road it should only be utilized in the densest traffic areas. The combination of shoreline and interior sections, with shoreline access, would provide a scenic and easy trail that people of most abilities could explore. The extension of that trail across the Mendenhall River via a pedestrian foot bridge, connecting with the west side trails would create a dynamic trail system. The West Glacier Trail improvements and the upgrade of social trails are sorely needed and would provide safer access to the west side of the glacier.

Not addressed in the EIS are improvements to the upper West Glacier Tail. This trail has provided dramatic views of the glacier in the past but the revegetation of the lower overlooks has obscured those views. At the end of the West Glacier Trail the view is clear, because of the higher elevation, and provides some of the most dramatic glacier views accessible on foot. The problem is the trail crosses two streams, that may not be safe to cross due to snow pack melt. Upgrading this trail with two bridges, some minor trail improvement near the upper end, and providing an open day shelter would make this a classic day hike destination and with a nearly complete view of the Mendenhall from top to bottom.

The need for a Welcome Center is pretty evident with the ever-increasing number of visitors but the location is not ideal since it will replace the existing rock pavilion. While that structure, apparently is not old enough to qualify as “Historic” it has been a part of the glacier experience for a long time. Finding a way to preserve it would be desirable, not just for nostalgia sake but because it serves its purpose well, which is giving people a place to get out of the rain while admiring the glacier.

Last but not least is parking, which is mostly an issue for locals and tour buses. It is obviously important to have but not at the expense of filling a pond to make a parking lot. There must be a better solution then that, even if it involves walking a little further in the rain.

I hope these comments are helpful. And I look forward to seeing how the plan evolves.

Bob Engelbrecht