Comments on the Mendehall Glacier Visitor Facility Improvement Project DEIS

Some of the projects proposed in the Mendehall Glacier Visitor Facility Improvement Project address needed and useful improvements. These include improved parking facilities, additional trails, and improvements to the existing visitor center. However many of the projects in the proposed the alternatives will turn the area into a “Disney theme park” and one clearly is the result of pressure from a commercial interest. None of the Alternatives offer the best course of action to improve visitor experience and retain the value of the area to visitors of the local population. Four of the alternatives include motorized boats on Mendenhall Lake, which is clearly the result of pressure from a commercial operator. The least expensive to implement and maintain would be alternative of “no action”; however, with modification to remove some of the more detrimental projects an alternative could result in a good course of action.

The “My Turn” column by Ken Post in the 02/02/2023 issue in the Juneau Empire provides an excellent summary of individual items in all of the proposed alternatives that are particularly questionable. He also presents a very good summary of some of their adverse effects. I agree with his conclusions. My comments below address a few of the proposed projects that I find especially problematic.

The four alternatives that include motorized, either internal combustion or electric, boats on Mendenhall Lake should be removed from consideration. The lake is well suited for non-motorized craft that include kayaks, canoes, and other small boats. A 48-passenger landing craft is not compatible with non-motorized recreational boats that are popular on the lake. Smaller capacity motor boats are also incompatible with non-motorized boaters that include both local individuals and small commercial operators. Motorized traffic on the lake will affect migratory birds that use the lake environment. The facilities required to maintain and support the commercial operation of motorized vessel both at the launch point and at the shore near the glacier will substantially and adversely affect the environment and the experience of other users. Increased activity near the glacier will be further degraded by the significant increase in traffic in the area. Clearly this proposal is driven by an individual or a small group of people who are profit driven at the expense of everyone else.

The Dredge Lake area is a safe refuge from the hordes of tourists in the MGVF, which most of us avoid during the “tourist” season. Expansion of tourist use in that area is not needed and will degrade its current use, which include afternoon walks, hiking, mountain biking, and fishing. In the past, Alaska Department of Fish and Game has stocked several lakes with trout for sport fishing. It is an artificially created habitat and is not a visitor point of attraction like the Mendenhall Glacier.

The Mendenhall Glacier area provides a unique opportunity for visitors to see and learn firsthand how land is shaped by glacial action and the evolution of vegetation, and its use by fish and wildlife, which include beavers and salmon, as well as bears. The Lakeside Visitor Center and connecting curved bridge are completely unnecessary as is the bridge over the Mendenhall River. These and the proposed 14-foot-wide paved road (it is not a trail) will destroy the natural moraine landscape that are part of the natural configuration left by the glacier. These activities such would drastically alter these natural features and are good examples of projects that will turn the Mendenall Glacier Recreation Area into a “Disney theme park”.

Many of the projects in all of the alternatives, except “no action” emphasize the development of infrastructure to support commercial interests at the expense of naturally created habitats. Most visitors to Alaska are here to see and experience the naturally created habitats such as the environment created by the Mendenhall Glacier. Many of the projects, some of which I have listed, will severely affect the landscape of the Mendenhall Glacier area and will be irreversible. It is important that development activities do not have an irreversible effect on the land and biota and retain the natural surrounding so visitors can see and understand an important geologic process that has shaped large areas of the world.