

February 19, 2023

Dear Mr. Sherman and Project Team,

It's been 9 months since I last commented on the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area (MCRA) development options. I am pleased that new alternatives have addressed some of my concerns. I would especially like to thank you for considering two alternative locations for the Welcome Center. I also appreciate the expanded Table 2-1, Summary Comparison of Alternatives. I participated in the Open House at the historic Visitor's Center on January 24, 2023, attended a meeting at the Forest Service office on January 25, 2023, listened to the recording of the January 26, 2023 public webinar, and have read many of the recent public comments on the project's website. I have studied the 3 new alternatives, and also re-studied the original 4 alternatives.

I remain greatly concerned about the scale of proposed development and the expansion of the Visitor Center Management Unit. I believe the environmental and operational impacts will be much greater than articulated in the draft (DEIS) and supplemental draft (SD) EIS documents. **Mostly, I fear that in an effort to provide more access to the beautiful and unique MGRA to more people, the very things that people want to experience will be destroyed.**

People come to Juneau to be part of our pristine natural environment. We are not a place of theme parks and faux-nature experiences - MGRA is the real deal. Constructing human made elements can severely compromise the experience. Neither residents nor visitors want the iconic view of the glacier replaced with a photo of boats chugging back and forth from the ice face to the docks – docks on both ends that are filled with people waiting their turn to board.

The glacier is rapidly receding, and we do not know how much interest visitors will have in visiting MGRA when the glacier retreats out of the lake. As sightlines and short hikes to easily view the ice are reduced, will there still be the excessive demand by visitors? As a nearly 40 year Juneau resident and user of MGRA, I see the beauty and fascination of the whole story of glacial recession. None of the alternatives to date (except, perhaps, Alternative 1 – No Action) recognize this essential issue. Instead, all of the development options assume that the demand will continue to increase and there will need to be efforts made to “chase the ice” for visitors to have an enjoyable experience. At a minimum, any development at MGRA should be limited to no more than 20 years (I suggest this figure due to projected retreat of the glacier's face), and there should be development action targets that are based on actual data and metrics before various components are undertaken. For example, as a baseline development, the plan could extend the existing bear viewing trail toward the west approximately .5 mile, as an on-grade 4-6 ft wide gravel trail that ends at the lakeshore. **If** visitors to this area increase to a point that specific negative conditions of overcrowding, erosion, etc. occur, **then** the option of extending, widening, or looping the trail (to a ‘next level development’) to disperse the crowd would be considered. Through the use of if/then scenarios, there would be an iterative and continual assessment of necessary development components that is based on scientific data rather than the current approach that assumes that high demand to all portions of MGRA will continue for many decades, so build, build, build.

My comments on elements of the DEIS and SDEIS follow.

1. I remain concerned that the development alternatives do not yet address the concept of limiting the number of visitors or the amount of human made structures. As I said in my first comment letter, my priority for development at MGRA is to first control the number of visitors both per day and per season. The 3 new options do not address this idea. In fact, all of the discussion that I have heard related to motorized boats and shoreline facilities such as docks indicates the opposite – it was recently stated by several project officials that the expected duration of visits to the MGRA will

increase as a result of motorized boats and expanded trail options for commercial use. So the projection is that the visitor loads (and impacts to MGRA) will increase and the durations will increase. I strongly feel that development components that cause people to want to stay longer, especially motorized boats and commercial bike trails, should not be added. There is no data provided that point to people wanting to stay longer, so is this a solution looking for a problem that doesn't exist? I support responsible, cautious improvement of trails to disperse the current crowds into different areas of the current Visitor Center Management Unit as illustrated in Alternative 1. I do not support any 14 ft. wide trails, as these are not trails – they are roads, whether or not they are paved or raised. There are highly trafficked sensitive trails in many national parks (eg. Grand Canyon) that maintain normal single user width of 4-5ft. If MGRA trails are properly maintained, single use width is both adequate and appropriate.

2. I do not support a bridge over the Mendenhall River to connect the east side to the campground. There is no documented justification for a costly and environmentally brutal bridge. Trails on the east side can be improved for skiing and hiking to support documented needs at appropriate times in the future without being connected to the campground. Without a bridge, cross country skiing (and associated parking) will be better distributed to multiple locations around MGRA. This also allows the Nordic Ski Club to have events in one location, while general skiing can occur in another area. In a quick Google search, I learned that cross country grooming equipment can be used on trails as narrow as 20" and snowmobile widths average about 48". I have also recently observed snow grooming at the campground. There is simply no need to have trails (roads) that are 14ft. wide. Additionally, I share the concerns raised by others in public comment that it is desirable to keep the west side of the lake in its more pristine condition. Connecting the areas with a bridge will destroy the benefits of having a 'quiet area' and a 'busy area' within MGRA.
3. I do not support large elevated deck/platforms (eg. Alt 6 and 7), large bridges such as the Crescent Bridge, or asphalt paved trails. I do not support the construction of any dock facilities, even those that are seasonal (they still need a place to be stored through the winter and the storage area will be an unsightly impact current natural conditions). Docks are not needed because motorized boats are inappropriate and destructive to the natural experience that is at the core of the Forest Service's mission for MGRA. Please keep the human touch on the natural landscape as light as possible.
4. I support the purpose of a Welcome Center. There is clearly a need to transfer visitors off and on buses, get them oriented to the place they have come to see, use restrooms, and buy trinkets. These are very different activities from the activities of actually experiencing the MGRA. Because of the large number of visitors, preparing for and ending the experience needs to be separated from the actual authentic experience. The only alternative that accomplishes this is Alt. 7. Alternatives 2 through 6 obstruct natural sightlines to the lake and glacier, concentrate the visitor buses and people in a congested area, and require intense human-made infrastructure of bridges and decks/platforms in an area that should actually be prioritized for reducing development from current levels. The current northern parking area is premium land where the "Ah Ha!" moment of visiting MGRA occurs. The human built structures such as bus waiting shelters, parking, viewing shelter, etc. should be minimized (removed) in this area. Conversely, the site for Alt. 7 allows more design flexibility to respond to Welcome Center program needs and allows opportunity for future expansion (even though my personal hope is that expansion will never be needed). It also best allows the building to be cost effectively closed during winter without leaving an unfriendly feeling of an obvious "closed for the season" message to residents who use MGRA year-round. With careful, sensitive planning and design, the land between the Welcome Center and the "Ah Ha!" premiere viewing area can become part of the authentic experience. There can be inviting interpretive paths that set the visitor up for the "Ah Ha" moment that they will experience at the end of a 5-10 minute walk. It does NOT have to be a widened shoulder along Glacier Spur Rd where thousands of people walk while electric trams pass.

5. I support Alt. 7's deletion of the café. The need to re-introduce food to MGRA is not adequately documented in the DEIS or SDEIS. It is not warranted for the current 1-1.5 hr visits. It adds tremendous complexities to manage and operate the facility in a wildlife rich area. It complicates design solutions for deliveries and garbage handling that, at this point, have not been addressed in the alternatives or adequately discussed in the planning documents. State and national parks throughout the country have reduced or eliminated food service over the last two decades because of a myriad of complexities. Those that still have food service typically offer poor quality, over priced pre-manufactured foods, not the home made pie and hamburgers that were served for a relatively short period, but are fondly remembered from 6 decades ago at Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center. There is no evidence presented in the documents to make one believe that food service would be successful as part of any development plan.
6. Thank you for reducing the number of cabins and modifications to campsites in Alt 5. This is a reasonable compromise from the original proposal. The area is used extensively by locals in the winter, and I believe that a few cabins would enhance year round use. However, I do not support connecting the campground to the east Visitor Center Area with a bridge (see comment 3.). The bridge would negatively affect the ambiance of the campground by substantially increasing bikes and hikers in summer, and skiers and snow machines in winter.
7. I want to clearly reiterate my disapproval of any type of motorized boats within MGRA, and the infrastructure for such boats (docks, launch ramps, roads to docks, etc.). No - Simply, No! The DEIS and SDEIS do not provide sufficient evidence to justify any degree of motorized activity.

In a recent phone conversation with my sister, I told her I was writing this letter. She has visited Juneau dozens of times over the past 4 decades, and was appalled at the idea of motorized boats and the lack of sensitivity to proposed development at MGRA. She said, "People who live in Juneau are the stewards of the land. It's a hard place to live, and they wouldn't live there if they didn't feel strongly about taking care of it. Stewardship protects areas like the glacier from capitalism." (BTW, she's a conservative Republican). She and I both support reasonable tourism in Juneau, recognizing that there is a delicate balance. She concluded by saying, "Take pictures; leave footprints. And make a t-shirt out of that!"

I will close by reiterating what I stated last May, ***"I want MGRA to be rich in its authentic self for generations beyond me, so I am asking that everyone think carefully before changing what nature has created."***

Thank you, again, for this opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

Catherine Fritz