

An alternative to a State Park with regard to the existing restaurant and other buildings.

We have made daily visits to read the letters posted in the “Public Comment/Objection Reading Room” for the Sweetwater NOI on the USFS website. It is clear that the vast majority of commenters are opposed to the size and volume proposed in the current site plan. In fact, many of those are strongly opposed to a State Park designation for the area. A few letters go so far as to point out that both the USFS and CPW would be in violation of their own policies should they continue the push for a State Park.

Oddly, out of those who have submitted comments supporting the current, higher volume State Park plan, very few mention having ever visited this area. Some have even done some name-calling, giving the locals unflattering labels and accused them of wanting to keep the public out. These locals, aka vocal minority or “NIMBYS” do not want to prevent others from enjoying the area. Guests from all over the world have been welcomed for years. No State Park pass or entry fees required!

We want to share the pristine, rustic, “Sweetwater” experience with visitors but at a volume that does not negatively impact the ecosystem or put the safety of our children and livestock at risk. The State Park proposal would completely alter the historic Sweetwater experience, morphing it into another cookie cutter park and campground at the expense of the plants, wildlife and water quality as well as the local culture and livelihood of the local ranchers.

If the public comments are truly being considered, then perhaps one viable alternative would be to forego State involvement in favor of a local concessionaire. The Forest Service manager said the USFS has no money and will never pay to maintain buildings. He threatened early on to just tear everything down if the locals refused to support a State Park. The cost of demolition and disposal would actually be substantial! Instead, why not sell or lease the structures. The owner or lessee would assume all liability and would not be able to open or operate any structure until all legal requirements were met. The USFS could use the money from the sale to pay for staff or other upgrades. We have had private donors approach us in the past regarding this type of venture. We are confident the Restaurant could be restored with ADA additions and other upgrades and again be available to serve Sweetwater visitors as well as Eagle County and Garfield County locals.

The restaurant was always part of the “Save the Lake” effort. Some donors even asked if they could specify that their donation could go toward re-opening the restaurant. EVLT staff actually assured these donors that this would occur.... Perhaps they spoke out of ignorance but that was one of many unfulfilled promises.

Regardless of past errors and misunderstandings, public support for the restoration of the restaurant cannot be ignored.

Immediately following the Governor’s surprise announcement to make Sweetwater a State Park, several open meetings were held to gather public input. The desire for the restaurant was near or at the top of the list at each of these gatherings.

Next, in March 2023, CDR Associates (Collaborative Decision Resources), a meeting facilitating group hired by CPW, published an on-line survey. They were careful to omit the word “restaurant” from any of the multiple-choice options, using the more ambiguous term “food-service” instead. They could not, however, suppress or ignore the support for a restaurant in the open comments at the end of the survey. Though the full content was not made public, open comment topics were identified, categorized and ranked. Support for the restaurant was #1 under the “Facilities” category. In fact, out of all comment topics logged, support for the restaurant was 4th overall following three topics under the “Concerns” category: # 1, Development, # 2, Crowds and # 3 Environmental Impact. Interestingly, the topic that ranked # 5 was Anti-State Park Sentiment which was listed in the “Other” category.

Another strong example of support comes from the public comment form that was available on the EVLT website from October 2021 to May 2023. The 228 comments submitted were sorted and again topics were tallied. The #1 topic was support for the restaurant.

Like Trappers Lake Lodge located about one hour from Meeker, the Sweetwater restaurant has and should continue to provide a wonderful, unique experience for over-night and day visitors as well as many who routinely traveled an hour or so to enjoy the restaurant. The Sweetwater Lake Working Group asked early on about buying the land around the restaurant or buying the buildings. We were told the USFS never sells land or buildings. We have requested but have yet to see these regulations and there are recently documented sales of USFS land in both the town of Minturn and in Summit County.

The USFS has argued that a restaurant would require a much higher guest and traffic volume as they are proposing. We respectfully disagree. The fact that, prior to the 2017 closure mandated by the seller, the restaurant operated successfully for decades proves it is a viable business. The menu has always been small and simple to keep costs under control. The commercial kitchen is extremely important to any outfitter for staff meals as well as food preparation for long and over-night excursions. By accounting for the outfitter's use and adding a liquor license, profitability with historic guest volume could easily be achieved. All of this was detailed in a business plan requested by the Forest Manager. This plan was submitted but never acknowledged.

The historic Sweetwater Restaurant with buffalo burgers, Colorado trout and homemade pie on the modestly priced menu appears to be absolutely appropriate according to Section 2343 of Forest Service Manual 2300, Amendment 2300-2023-1 titled "Concession Uses Involving Privately Developed Facilities."

Why not sell the buildings and issue a resort or permit? Why not let the permit holder bring the current facilities up to date, make some improvements to the camping area and to lake shore access and allow the historic use and volume to continue. Why not prioritize the restoration and conservation of a rare piece of Colorado history over modern recreation?

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Respectfully,

The Sweetwater Community Club Board, The Sweetwater Lake Working Group and concerned citizens.

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