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Comments: Comments on the Mendenhall Glacier Master Plan

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The Mendenhall Glacier area offers the potential for world class wildlife viewing. I am a biological field technician who has lived in the area for 30 years. The current Masterplan's focus on "chasing ice" appears to intrude on much wildlife and fisheries habitat, which should be a more sustainable attraction than the rapidly disappearing ice.

Since the glacier is in rapid retreat and will soon no longer be visible from the proposed parking area I would urge that the parking area be kept much further back down Glacier Spur Road or moved to the west side of Steep Creek. The proposed much enlarged parking area appears to pave over an area frequently used by black bears, beavers and porcupines, which are a highlight of many people's trips to the area. As the glacier recedes into the distance, wildlife viewing is likely to replace it as the main attraction. It certainly has the potential to do so, but not if the wildlife resource is destroyed by development.

There is a proposal to fill in the pond between current parking lots to create a much larger bus parking area. This pond contains young salmon and it is salmon that power this unique wildlife ecosystem. Bears bring their cubs to feed on sockeye salmon from late July into September and later coho salmon. The salmon carcasses that bears spread around in the woods feed many other birds and animals (biologists have counted 137 species) and are natural fertilizer for plants and trees. Salmon-fertilized plants have greater nutritional value for wildlife so enhance life for bears, porcupines and beavers and many songbirds that congregate around Steep Creek in spring. The beavers build dams that create pools where young salmon can rest and feed. The natural ecosystem that has developed here is a unique opportunity for many people to view a variety of wildlife up close. Several beavers use this pond and are frequently to be seen here in the evening. Bears frequently feed on ground cones (another important bear food) around this pond. It makes no sense to build a parking lot on top of this pond. Why throw wildlife under the buses?

Many of the bears that make use of Steep Creek in Spring, Summer and Fall, range into Dredge Lakes and towards Thunder Mountain, Nugget Creek and the valley between Thunder Mountain and Heintzleman Ridge. Bears frequently cross Glacier Spur road to reach Steep Creek in summer, but the proposed parking area looks to be planted right on top of their crossing area. Bears frequently come close to being knocked down on Glacier Spur Road and have been killed by vehicles there more than once. The likelihood of injuring an animal increases with increased bus traffic.

Adding a food service at the facility would seem a bad idea with so many bears nearby. Human food is best kept out of bear country to reduce the chance of bears associating people with food. Once that happens, bears become bolder in approaching people and have to be destroyed. A food service would require adding people to deliver food, serve it and remove more trash adding to increased traffic and demand for parking.

I would like to advocate for keeping large tour buses and any new buildings back from the lakeshore and away from the wildlife habitat around Steep Creek. A theatre for showing films typically has no windows so does not need to be built in view of the glacier. Perhaps a satellite visitor's centre could be built at the site of the old Walmart where ample parking already exists, alleviating

overcrowding at the Mendenhall on busier days, after all there was once a glacier in Lemon Creek and the Mendenhall Glacier will like be out of sight by the time a new visitor's centre is built. I fully support having a theatre and educating people about the disappearing glacier and climate change, about the local wildlife resources and about local Tlingit culture. The Hoonah Tlingit advocate respect for their homeland including not making noise in front of their Glacier Bay glaciers and not harassing wildlife. I think some consideration of Alaska Native culture would be appropriate.

The idea of an underwater viewing area is interesting though poses risk to salmon and wildlife during construction so close to the salmon stream. Disruption to salmon streams is typically only doable during the short early summer window after salmon fry leave the stream in Spring and before spawning in late July. Salmon eggs are incubating in the stream bed from late July through the winter and Spring. The plan intends to move part of Steep Creek to make way for the paved parking area. Salmon spawning streams are normally given a 100ft buffer zone along stream banks, meaning no roads or other development within 100ft of the stream to protect habitat. Such a buffer is currently absent where Glacier Spur road and current parking areas are adjacent to the stream. An alternative would be to end the Glacier Spur road before the current Steep Creek culvert to eliminate vehicles crossing the creek at all. Roughly 2/3 of a mile back from the current visitor centre on Glacier Spur Road, the glacier comes into view.

This area would provide an alternative parking area for additional buses, without loss of salmon and beaver habitat. This would prevent buses driving through the area where bears frequently cross the road, sometimes being knocked down.

An alternative site for bus parking and visitor centre, if it must be near the lakeshore, would be to the west of Steep Creek in the vicinity of the Moraine Ecology trail. Re-aligning the road and relocating the visitor's centre to the area about 400yds to the west of the current parking lots would keep traffic away from bears that are frequently traversing the area between Steep Creek and the East Glacier Trail. The same bears that feed on salmon at Steep Creek spend a lot of time in the valley between Thunder Mountain and Heintzleman Ridge. I believe the proposed under-the-road crossing area is inadequate to allow bears free movement between their feedings areas. Bears are likely to try and use the proposed enlarged parking area where chances of negative encounters with people and traffic are very high. People could still access bear viewing areas on foot from the west side of Steep Creek. This would also avoid moving the stream. Improvements could be made to the stream by moving the existing road away from it and re-establishing vegetation along the banks. This would involve re-aligning the last 1,200 yards of Glacier Spur Road. The bears use the Dredge Lakes area as well so care should be taken to provide access for bears with underpasses at existing bear trails. Suggested road re- alignment shown in red below could lead to new parking and facilities, while the existing parking areas and road would be re-vegetated. Another alternative could be to add additional parking underground, under the bedrock area immediately to the east of the existing parking areas. This would avoid paving over existing ponds and wildlife habitat.

I would also support some kind of aerial tramway powered by quiet, renewable energy to allow visitors access to the lakeshore. This could allow a uniquely intimate view of the current

rainforest and be an experience itself where you might breathe in the scent of cottonwood trees rather than diesel fumes from many buses, and listen to birdsong instead of engines running. It would allow wildlife to pass underneath giving people a chance to view animals safely.

A system of pedestrian trails and aerial tramway (for those who cannot walk far) could allow access

to the lakeshore, or electric vehicles for those with mobility issues. Keeping human traffic on one side of the stream would allow separation of bears and people. The proposed passageway under the current road is likely to be quite dark and not provide for the best bearing viewing as seems indicated in the picture on page 23 of the Masterplan and while it may encourage some bears to pass safely beneath the road, bears use more than one route to traverse the road, if only to escape other bears. A pedestrian walkway across the creek would likely become a viewing platform if bears are visible.

The current natural beauty of the area is greatly enhanced by mountain scenery uninterrupted by manmade structures. The current visitor centre was well designed to be unobtrusive with a low profile and small footprint. The feeling of wilderness on the edge of town where no buildings intrude on the landscape is in danger of being dramatically altered by new structures. Buildings typically have electric lights glowing after dark, often for security reasons. Added larger buildings will introduce more light pollution in an area popular with those trying to view the aurora borealis in winter. Will the proposed 14ft wide pedestrian/bike/ski lakeshore trail ever have lights invading the lakeshore? At present it is possible to walk much of the lakeshore from fall through spring without viewing any buildings or manmade structures. I wonder if anyone has considered the loss of wilderness with the addition of the proposed bridge and trail.

The new lakeshore trail also provides access to an area of Dredge Lakes that seldom sees many people or dogs. I have seen arctic hares, deer and beavers in the north-west corner of Dredge Lakes where wildlife have a refuge from dogs. Wildlife needs space away from groups of people and freedom from being chased by dogs. It is always amazing to me how much bears tolerate from people, but their tolerance does seem pushed beyond their limits when cubs are chased by dogs or when people approach a bear rapidly and quietly on a bicycle. I would advise closing trails to dogs near Steep Creek during the tourist season, namely the Steep Creek Trail (currently closed to dogs, but not always observed), the Nugget Falls Trail, Trail of Time and East Glacier Trail. There are many dog walkers in Juneau and dogs are great companions, but the safety of other people must be considered in choosing where to walk them.

The new lakeshore trail adds a new parking lot (30+ spaces?) within the Mendenhall Campground where many people walk and ski. I would prefer not to have trees removed from this area to add yet more pavement in a place where I frequently recreate.

Adding motorized boat docks to the lake will be a major intrusion to the serenity of the lake. The lake is the nursery for the young sockeye salmon that grow into food for the bears. Transportation of huge numbers of people across the lake would demand constant boat traffic and add potential lakeshore erosion from boat wakes. Motorized boats will add considerable noise to an area currently somewhat peaceful as well as introducing potential pollution. Even small amounts of oil from engines can impact life in the lake.

There is very limited space for people to go once set ashore on the west side of the lake. The land, having been very recently uncovered by ice, is unstable in many places. The landscape is

very steep with frequent rockfalls. The glacier seems in danger of very quickly being out of sight from the lakeshore even from the proposed docks. The West Glacier Trail is the site of many rescues that result from falls on steep rocky cliffs and those are from people able-bodied enough to complete the trail. Increasing access to the glacier seems likely to increase the number of injuries. A covered viewing platform on the glacier side of one of the rocky outcrops on the west side of the glacier would at least keep a manmade structure out of sight from the lake shore. An aerial tram could provide alternative safe access to a viewing platform while keeping motorized

boats off the lake. But still, only so many people can fit into a given space. There must be some limited entry system or at least timed entry of people to any facility to make it workable.

There are many challenges to meet, but the right design could give visitors and locals alike, a highly enjoyable experience. Personally I don't equate paving over any vegetation-covered areas or ponds as 'improvement", particularly when they contain important wildlife habitat. Please consider the goal of preserving scenery unencumbered by manmade structures, preserving peace and quiet (a welcome rarity in today's industrial world) and the wildlife that makes Juneau such a unique place to live. We should show respect for the land and the wildlife it supports.

Juneau, Alaska resident since 1986
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