Regional Forester David E. Schmid
USDA Forest Service, Alaska Region

Submitted via project public participation portal

June 25, 2023

Dear Mr. Schmid,

This letter represents my formal objection to the draft Record of Decision for the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area (MGRA) Visitor Facility Improvements project under the 36 CFR 218 Pre-decisional Administrative Review Process.

I provided written comments in response to the DEIS on 3.30. 2022, 4.3.2022, and 5.6.2022, and on the SDEIS on 2.19.2023, which gives me standing to object to the project.

I have two primary objections to the preferred alternative: Firstly, I object to the location of the new Welcome Center and associated seasonal office building, and secondly, I object to the crescent bridge.

1. Welcome Center: The Welcome Center is a needed facility to transfer visitors off and on buses, get them oriented to the place they have come to see, use restrooms, and buy trinkets. However, I object to the location selected in the preferred alternative, as it does not justify the high impact that the building(s) will have on the natural view shed and surrounding environment. As historic photos clearly illustrate, the panoramic view that a person gets from the current arrival parking area is an awesome and memorable experience. It is precious. It needs to be honored and protected as a natural vista, uninterrupted by buildings and structures. The current human built structures such as bus waiting shelters, parking, viewing shelter, and tents should be removed from this area, as well.

Remedy: The site in Alternative 7 is out of the premier view area, and allows more design flexibility to respond to Welcome Center program needs. It allows the best access for arriving buses without interrupting the glacier and lake viewing experiences. While I don't support food service in the Welcome Center, the Alternative 7 site is the best for controlling garbage and deliveries if food service must be done. 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.

There has been insufficient development and thoughtful analysis of the Alternative 7 site. In fact, it was only after significant concerns were raised in public comment of the DEIS that the project team even began to consider the Alternative 7 or Alternative 6 locations. This lack of robust study of site options for a significant building violates the intent of an EIS.

2: Crescent Bridge: I object to the development of the crescent bridge. This is an unnecessary eyesore that will also interrupt the natural view plane. There has been no data presented that supports the need for this bridge. One project team leader told me that the main purpose of

the bridge was to have a place to take photos. This is insufficient justification for the bridge, and may not even be a viable photo op point as the glacier continues to recede. Additionally, there have been no alternatives presented for addressing pedestrian pathway crowding, if it actually exists.

Remedy: If data suggest the need for additional pathways, then widening the current pedestrian route in front of the current outdoor restrooms would have less visual and human impact. If the Welcome Center is moved to the Alternative 7 site, then there may not even be a need to expand pathways as visitors will not arrive to the area in large crowds at the same time – they will be more slowly staggered as they walk from the Welcome Center to the viewing areas. Like the Welcome Center site, a more rigorous and sensitive analysis of bridges and platforms for pedestrians needs to be done to meet the requirements of an EIS.

Please reference my previous public comment documents that describe these objections in greater detail.

I feel it is critical to restate my over-riding concern that I raised in previous comments. ***"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 for your thoughtful consideration of these objections.

Sincerely,

Catherine Fritz