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Comments: Alternative Plans

There are good alternatives to the proposal from the US Forest Service (USFS) on future use for the newly acquired Sweetwater Lake property. What follows is a comparison of this proposal with three alternative uses.

Current USFS Proposal with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) management

Return to Previous Use with Concessionaire License/Granger Thye Permit

No Development and USFS only management

Creative Alternative with CPW, Concessionaire, and Community Involvement

Current USFS Proposal with CPW Management

Under the proposed plan, the Sweetwater Property would be managed by CPW similarly to a state park. This involves redesign of the site, utilizing previously disturbed land, some of which is currently in native vegetation and some of which is pastureland. It includes removing some standing buildings. It suggests developing a new campground to provide 20 campsites, some with electrical hookups, a bathhouse, and a dump station in what is now a pasture used by horses and wildlife. Building 12 new cabins - some dry and some wet are recommended. It proposes constructing a new barn and stable in a pasture along with a new road to get to them, overnight equestrian camping sites, and extra day use and overnight parking. It involves erection of a new lodge, maintenance facilities, equipment storage, and staff housing. All of this is intended to increase visitor use from an average of less than 60 people per day previously to a new 250 people per day.

The park experience will be similar to that of the other 42 state parks in Colorado.

Cost to taxpayers: High, for construction and development, road improvements, and ongoing management. Also entrance fees and higher campground fees.

Impact to community: High with a 4 to 10 times increase in visitor numbers affecting traffic, noise, safety, road construction, water impacts, livestock usage, trash, etc.

Impact to environment and wildlife: High negative impacts with increased visitation spread over a wider footprint. Pastures turned into campgrounds, buildings moved from previous use, buildings torn down or boarded up, new buildings constructed for overnight visitor use (dry and wet cabins), staff housing, administration, maintenance, shower houses, lodge, etc.

Return to Previous Use with Concessionaire License/Granger Thye Permit

One alternative is to return the property to its previous use prior to the sale of the land and its transfer to the USFS. This use combined a USFS campground on one end of the lake with a private resort across the lake. The resort included a restaurant, rental cabins and boats, and horseback rides. The resort company, AJ Brink Outfitter, has expressed a desire to work with USFS to continue to operate the facilities which would open to the public. Since first the realtor and later the USFS have allowed the buildings to fall into disrepair, they will all need to be remodeled. The resort company and the community have offered to fundraise and write grants for the monies to restore the buildings to prior state health department compliance. One donor has already come forward with an offer to repair the restaurant. The USFS can set reasonable deadlines for the funds to be raised, and a manageable timeline for repair can be established. Remodeling buildings will be more cost efficient than removing structures and building new ones.

Restoring the restaurant is highly favored by all the previous users of the lake area. It retains the local culture. It restores a community gathering spot. It offers an important amenity for day users driving this far from food service or grocery stores.

The visitor numbers should be similar to previous use (the outfitter has been running the resort for 30 years).

The resort experience will be similar to the beloved one of the past and similar to only a few other small, old fashioned resorts around the state.

Cost to taxpayers: Low While the USFS will have some minor oversight costs, the concessionaire would pay a permit fee to offset, plus county sales tax would be collected.

Impact to community: Low - same as historic use

Impact to environment and wildlife: Low negative impacts - same as previous use

No Development and USFS only management

This alternative allows the land to "go back" to its natural state. Buildings are torn down; no new campgrounds are developed. The USFS can continue to operate its small campground on the south end of the lake or not. The barn and horse business can continue if the company feels it remains economically feasible. Otherwise, even the pastures will resort back to nature with water rights being forfeited.

A benefit of this plan is that local cattlemen have working permits with the USFS alone.

The fear for this plan was that the area would be overrun with visitors and a general free-for-all would result. However, in the three years since the USFS has acquired the land, the actual visitor numbers have fallen. Without the amenities previously offered and with no new amenities yet produced, the property has less attraction for many users. The lake has no beach and little boat access. The established camping spaces are primitive and small. There is not even any potable water available. The distance from town is too far for teen drinking parties. And all hiking trails are uphill!

The user's experience would be similar to other mountain lakes in White River National Forest.

Cost to taxpayers: Low - some minor USFS management, similar to many other areas the USFS owns but does not oversee on a day to day basis.

Impact to community: Positive impacts in that less people will use the area, but a trade off as less opportunities for community recreation, too.

Impact to environment and wildlife: Positive impacts as the property reverts to wild.

Creative Alternative with CPW, Concessionaire, and Community involvement

This alternative allows for what Governor Polis suggested, "We want to make sure that we have a sustainable level of visitation and people that visit here have that special experience and it's a different experience than people might expect at other parts of our state park system[hellip] preserving the undeveloped nature of the property"

This alternative starts by developing a 3-way partnership between CPW; the former resort managers who become park concessionaires; and the local Sweetwater Community. The USFS will have minimal oversight, only so far as to make sure all Forest Service regulations and legalities are followed, with no need for design nor management input.

Working together, the three partners will design an "out of the box", creative future for Sweetwater Lake that retains both the history and culture of the area. One such example is given here, but the actual end result could be even better if the three representative groups are genuinely allowed to direct this project.

Sweetwater History and Conservation Area is one sample idea.

In this scenario, the former restaurant building will be remodeled to become an ADA compliant Nature Center with plant, animal, and fossil displays, a classroom for environmental education and nature crafts, a home base for children's nature projects, family nature hikes, guided bird walks, exploring animal tracks and signs, and other programs. These programs would be kept small - for example one school classroom or boy scout troop at a time. These programs can be run by CPW Interpretive Staff or contracted with a local expert group such as Walking Mountain Science Center.

A new History Museum and Diamond Jack Restaurant will be constructed in the area above and across the street from the previous restaurant. This location is where a former lodge/restaurant had been located historically. This new building can house a CPW information desk and small safety office if desired. It would also house a small office for the concessionaire, and perhaps a small store. The focal points, however, would be the History Museum and Restaurant. The museum would house displays and discussions of the extensive history of Sweetwater Lake. The restaurant would continue the western motif of the former restaurant and emphasize historic (and locally sourced) menu items such as buffalo burgers, elk steaks, rainbow trout, sourdough bread, and homemade pies. The size would be small with dining room seating for about 50, with 20 more on the deck overlooking the lake.

For lodging, the Historic Houses formerly used as rental cabins would be restored, each to its period. These houses were built in the 1920's to 1950's. Local businesses from Gypsum and Eagle (or as far as Vail to Aspen) would be solicited to "adopt a house" and help to pay for its remodel, guided by local historical associations. A historic plaque would be placed on each house with credit given to the company who restored it. Guests, especially multigenerational families, could once again rent the rustic yet fully furnished homes from the concessionaire. All of these cabins have kitchens while some have working fireplaces. Even historic board games (and no wifi!), would be available in the homes. The authentic atmosphere would give a true "living history" experience to the visitors.

Rowboats and canoes would be rented, fishing encouraged, hiking to the overlook or Indian Caves (once reopened), picnicking, and horseback rides would be reinstated as recreational activities. Small events would be permitted.

Other than the museum/restaurant, no new buildings would be necessary. The former motel units would be renovated for the employees of the concessionaire, along with the house nearest the barn for an equestrian office, staff housing, and equine equipment storage.

No housing would be needed by CPW as the concessionaire could cover round-the-clock routine oversight as they have done for the past 30 years. They also have close relationships with police, fire, and search and rescue departments in the area

The USFS could turn their campground over to CPW to manage. CPW could choose to move campsites up to the area near the USFS cabin in order to open the previous campground for day use, or just keep the small campground where it is. However, the campground would stay the same size - maximum 12 sites - and primitive with no electrical, water, or sewer hookups, and no generators permitted.

Equestrian camping could continue as previous with locations just below and beside the barn area used for camping before riding into the wilderness, or parking in the large turn around parking area while out day riding.

The lack of additional amenities, other than a museum and nature center for interpretation and programming, would keep the visitor numbers closer to the previous levels. If the marketing is also kept minimal, we could preserve the undeveloped nature of the property. The 20 year lease to CPW by USFS would also be a 20 year cap on additional development. If, in 20 years, a change was desired, a new NEPA process would be necessary.

The focus of this scenario is history and historic use of the Sweetwater Lake area. It builds on the unique experiences discovered there by locals and tourists alike over the past three decades. The only expansion is in interpretation of that history - both human and natural. The visitor's experience would be unique and different from other state parks.

Cost to taxpayers: Medium - new museum building, minimal CPW management; some offset income generated by concessionaire license with the state park and sales tax to county.

Impact to community: Low - use would be consistent with prior use over the last three decades.

Impact to environment and wildlife: Low - visitor levels similar to previous 30 years, only one new building in a previously disturbed area. Pastures kept for horses in summer and for wildlife year round.

Conclusions

In conclusion, a state park is not the best use of the USFS's Sweetwater Lake Property. This area is unique in plant and animal species, in its deep history, in its extended community, in its isolated location, and in the use enjoyed there for 100 years or so. I have illustrated three alternative plans that would be preferable and more cost effective than the proposed state park.

The scoping project described in this NEPA process is not a unique experience. Other than supporting equestrian camping, it looks exactly like what one might expect at other parts of our state park system. I have hopes that a new partnership with more local expertise could devise more creative ideas to preserve the undeveloped nature and history of the property.

Looking around Colorado at the other state parks, there are 4000 camping spots and 70 cabins already available. We don't need more of these at Sweetwater. We also don't need entrance fees for day use. Most parks are supported by camping fees. Consequently, viewing the established parks, RV's are one of the main things you see. This is not a bad use, just not a use compatible with Sweetwater Lake. Folks may come to a state park's RV camp for a week, bringing outdoor rugs, lawn chairs, bird feeders, etc. There is enjoyable chit chat back and forth between rigs. And there is noise from the close proximity of units: TV's, air conditioners, radios, generators, gas stoves, etc. The wildlife viewed will be the ground squirrels or camp birds looking for handouts. There may be a playground for kids. The development of this type of campground-park might be fun for some, but it would have a huge negative impact on the surrounding Sweetwater community.

The previous cultural focal points of the Sweetwater Lake property was the lake and the restaurant that overlooked it. A visitor would come to the lake for recreation, but the restaurant was usually part of it. While food

was important, it was more that the atmosphere combined old time western charm and an amazing view of the lake, and with welcoming, friendly staff. While 90% of the restaurant customers were from town or further away, usually there were locals at one or two tables. And conversation was relaxed and open between all the guests.

A typical visit to Sweetwater lake included lunch in the restaurant and then a hike to the overlook and on to explore the Indian Cave.

Or breakfast at the restaurant before going out to big game hunt using the cabins as a home base.

Or a half-day horseback ride, followed by dinner in the restaurant.

Or fishing in a rowboat followed by pie a la mode at the restaurant while watching the hummingbird feeders (about 8 feeders covered with a dozen hummers each!).

Or an evening of bringing your relatives to the lake for dinner and watching the eagle's nest through the spotting scope. (or the bears at the water's edge across the lake, or the moose near the inlet).

Or stopping into the restaurant's office/store for information and some light necessities for your campsite and staying to page through the scrapbooks and talk to the staff about the history of the area.

These experiences are not duplicated at other state parks. There are 42 of these parks around Colorado. There is only one Sweetwater Lake nature and history experience.

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