

Park Rangers Play to a ‘Standing-Room-Only’ Crowd - Recap of the June 18th National Park Service Meeting re: Muir Woods Reservation, Parking & Shuttle System

June 20, 2014



Dear Sustainable TamAlmonte Friends,

Thank you to all of you who attended the National Park Service’s June 18th meeting regarding their Muir Woods Reservation, Parking & Shuttle System. **We had a GREAT turn out!** The Tam Valley Rec. Center was packed to the brim with a ‘Standing Room Only’ crowd of concerned Marin residents. Many of them YOU!

NPS’s LACK OF INTEREST IN COMMUNITY CONCERNS:

Unfortunately, it was apparent from the start that the National Park Service (NPS) had little interest in listening to our concerns or recommendations. It was another government event orchestrated to control the outcome and just check the box on “public input”. An expensive contracted ‘Facilitator’ (Always beware when they bring in those expert fancy facilitators!) began the evening by laying out the format of the meeting:

1. Presentations by Supervisor Sears and Supervisor Kinsey; then
2. A presentation by the Park Rangers; followed by
3. A “Q & A”, with the Rangers answering questions that attendees were supposed to write on very small white cue cards. (So much for my prepared 2-minute presentation!)

I called out; “What about comments?” They reluctantly agreed to allow residents to also write comments on the cue cards. Yet, I can’t recall the Facilitator ever reading a single comment from the cue cards. They seemed to selectively choose cards with “acceptable” questions. Of course my written questions and comments never saw the light of day. They very occasionally called on a resident who had stood up with one hand above his/her head for a tiring amount of time, but, for most, the only way to make a meaningful comment was to shout it out.

NPS PRESENTATION

Having ignored most comments from local residents and organizations, the National Park Service’s PowerPoint presentation about the Muir Woods Reservation, Parking & Shuttle System was virtually the same as the one they gave on September 18th 2013. The only change they made was that they eliminated parking on Panoramic Hwy. And this was done only after very strong strong advocacy by Congressman Huffman.

In a Nutshell

The Park Service gave lip service to reducing traffic associated with Muir Woods, Woods, but all their plan offers so far is to reduce peaks of traffic by spreading the same amount of traffic throughout the week. They stated that 4000 daily visitors to Muir Woods is acceptable. This does nothing to reduce impacts on Muir Woods habitat and wildlife or reduce traffic-related pollution. Their current current plan to establish a Muir Woods Reservation System offers no reduction in reduction in the number of annual Muir Woods visitors and no real reduction in in traffic and without an acceptable CAP on the number of people allowed to visit visit Muir Woods, would likely increase visitation and traffic.

The Influencers & Decision Makers

It quickly became apparent that Marin County Supervisors have significant influence (if not control) over the outcome of National Park Service’s (NPS) Muir Muir Woods Reservation System. This is because the County owns Frank Valley Valley Road, which, according to NPS, is key to the success of the Reservation Reservation System. NPS wants to use part of Frank Valley Road as an extension of the Muir Woods Parking lot and charge visitors \$15 for two hours use of each parking space. The Supervisors are considering entering into a Memorandum of Understanding “MOU” with the park service regarding Frank Valley Road. Negotiations between the Supervisors and NPS will determine the the fate of Muir Woods and the neighboring communities.

Chris Carr, an attorney with Morrison-Foester, introduced himself and stated he he is representing the Mount Tam Task Force (MTTF). Mr. Carr asked some pertinent questions regarding whether or not NPS is upholding the Endangered Endangered Species Act and the Clean Water Act. He tipped his hat that his

efforts will help to influence the outcome. According to the MTTF website; “We will sue to protect the eco-system from Muir Woods to Muir Beach in the way the Founders intended.”

Contradictions, Inconsistencies and Misinformation

Stewardship:

The Park Rangers spoke about the Park Service’s good stewardship and listed a number of important improvements they have made to Muir Woods. However, Sierra Club Executive Member Laura Chariton noted that endangered Coho salmon in Redwood Creek have been in rapid decline for a number of years. She further declared that the Coho Salmon are at the point of extinction, with only 5 Coho Salmon nests (or redds) counted in Redwood Creek this year.

The Numbers:

The National Park Service representatives stated that they need parking on Frank Valley Road to accommodate 4000 visitors per day. Yet, Clayton Smith’s detailed analysis, using NPS’s own information, demonstrates that, if the current bus service is continued to Muir Woods, then parking on the environmentally sensitive road shoulder of Frank Valley Rd would not be necessary to accommodate 4000 daily visitors. Moreover, Clayton’s accounting indicates that the park service’s request for more parking and more shuttles, along with the reservation system and corresponding marketing, would actually allow for more than 4000 visitors per day.

Silence about Reservation Systems Boosting Sales:

One of the questions I asked, which was not addressed, was; “How will the reservation system boost Muir Woods ticket sales?” This topic was never discussed during the entire meeting. Most organizations engage a reservation system to increase sales, among other objectives. Now, it is possible that Muir Woods would not use the reservation system to boost ticket sales. Moreover, the reservation system could be used to lower sales and attendance. However, the only way to ensure this is to establish sustainable hourly, daily, monthly and yearly CAPs.

Reservation systems have great advantages for boosting sales, including:

- The ease of online real time booking (24 hrs. / 7 days a week);
- Increased utilization of the destination by booking visits throughout the entire day;
- Up-selling, cross-selling, offering package deals and promotional discounts;
- Online performance measurement and sales matrix - A business story can be measured and scaled as online systems will display the performance matrix and act as a critic for every move you make. Real-time reporting shows the number of prospects, and how many were converted to actual

- reservations. This builds a profile of customer behavior and identifies sales trends information that can be used for strategic planning purposes;
- Currency and language settings to appeal to a global audience; and
 - Repeat business with more sales - The customer database generated through sales can also be used for targeting future marketing campaigns.

Muir Woods Welcome Center near Hwy 101 and Hwy 1:

When asked about whether or not they were planning to build a Muir Woods Welcome Center in Manzanita, one Ranger downplayed it and said it would be a small overhang/shelter to protect visitors from rain and maybe a bathroom. Another Ranger stated that there were no plans for a Muir Woods Welcome Center in Manzanita. Yet, below are excerpts from the GGNRA General Management Plan (GMP), which describe the Welcome Center.

GGNRA GMP Excerpts:

“A New ‘Welcome Center’ in the vicinity of State Route 1 and Highway 101 to be developed in collaboration with Marin County, California State Parks, and Caltrans...The welcome facility would provide necessary visitor services that could include parking, sheltered waiting areas, restrooms, and orientation to the monument and other regional park destinations.” (Pg. 245, Volume I, GGNRA GMP)

“The ‘Welcome Center’ area can serve as a transfer hub for users to connect from private vehicles, tour buses and transit to the shuttle service.” (Pg. 196, Volume II, GGNRA GMP)

“In alternatives 1 and 2, a new off-site ‘Welcome Center’ would be created in the vicinity of State Route 1 and Highway 101 where visitors would board the shuttle. The center would provide parking, shelter, restrooms, park information, and snacks, and would be a transfer point between regional and local transit and national park destinations. The creation of the Welcome Center would have a long-term, major, beneficial impact on transit facility capacity, amenities, conditions, and on unsafe road shoulder parking on Muir Woods Road near the monument.” (Pg. 335, Volume II, GGNRA GMP)

“The proposed new or reconstructed facilities, such as the Highway 101 / State Route 1 ‘Welcome Center’ and parking area, would require additional capital investments.” (Pg. 344, Volume II, GGNRA GMA)

Trustworthy Independent Scientific Carrying Capacity Study:

In response to questions pertaining to a trustworthy Independent Scientific Carrying Capacity Study for Muir Woods and the surrounding communities, the Park Rangers stated that a Carrying Capacity Study for Muir Woods had already been completed. Yet, when they described the study, it seemed to only pertain to

customer satisfaction, determining how many people can visit the park and still feel they had a rewarding experience. Moreover, they admitted that the study was not independent, not peer reviewed and did not address impacts to neighboring communities.

It wasn't clear but the Rangers implied that the 3500 to 4000 daily visitors, which they based their Reservation System on, fell within an acceptable capacity (potentially determined by their Carrying Capacity study). These attendance numbers are lower than a few reported peaks of 5000 to 6000 visitors per day. However, if you multiply 3500 and 4000 by 365 (the number of days in the year), the result is between 1,277,500 to 1,460,000 visitors per year. This is much higher than last year's annual visitation of 954,000 visitors. With declining endangered Coho salmon and hazardous traffic congestion, it doesn't make sense that an acceptable annual capacity is equal to or greater than current conditions.

Furthermore, although many of us have made repeated requests for an Independent Scientific Carrying Capacity Study, NPS had never before mentioned their study nor made it publicly available. The Rangers acted surprised when residents said they wanted a copy.

Cart Before the Horse:

Ann Spake was the last speaker called on. She remarked that NPS's GGNRA General Management Plan (GMP) put the "cart before the horse". Ann continued; "Without comprehensive studies of the baseline condition of Muir Wood's resources and visitor use upon which to base decisions, such as the extent of allowable visitor use in relationship to preservation of natural resources, and without subsequent commitment in professional staffing to monitor conditions in the future, NPS has failed to fulfill its primary responsibilities."

Ann then cited excerpts from the GGNRA GMP, which indicate that NPS plans to do the exact opposite – approve the General Management Plan and then conduct baseline studies. Yet, another excerpt shows that NPS has not allocated enough staff to conduct the studies. The excerpt also demonstrates that NPS has only assigned 4% of its staff to provide what many consider the park's most important duties – protection of a diverse array of aquatic, vegetation, wildlife, and physical resources.

GGNRA GMP Excerpts:

"Implementation Planning: After the approval of this general management plan, the park staff would complete other more detailed studies before specific actions would be implemented. These studies would investigate the baseline condition of resources and visitor use in the park." (Pg. 299, Volume I, GGNRA GMP)

“The Natural Resources Management and Sciences Division Staff includes responsibility for protection of a diverse array of aquatic, vegetation, wildlife, and physical resources... Division staff manages the park’s ecosystems and numerous plant and animal species, including many sensitive, rare, threatened, or endangered species... With only 4% of the park’s total staff working in this division, current staffing levels prevent the park from completing the baseline studies and monitoring necessary to guide the park’s natural resources preservation efforts in the future. The division is central in addressing the effects of climate change on park resources and habitats.” (Pg. 165, Volume II, GGNRA GMP)

CONCLUSION

All in all, it appears that the National Park Service (NPS) has little interest in Marin citizens’ concerns. However, NPS needs cooperation from the Marin County Supervisors to accomplish their goals. So, the Supervisors can influence the outcome. And we need to keep influencing the Supervisors to make certain that that outcome is environmentally sustainable in regard to future impacts on Muir Woods, Redwood Creek, the Mount Tamalpais ecosystem and adjacent communities.

Cheers,
Sharon

Sharon Rushton

Chairperson

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