

MOUNT WASHINGTON COMMISSION
December 11, 2020 MINUTES (Approved 01/29/21)

A regular meeting of the Mount Washington Commission (MWC) was held by videoconference.

Call to Order. Chairman Bradley called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m. and read the *Checklist to ensure meetings are compliant with the Right-to-Know law during the State of Emergency*. PRESENT by roll call were Ed Bergeron/for Public, Sen Jeb Bradley/Senate (wife Karen, also present), Dir Phil Bryce/Div Parks and Rec (DPR) (DNCR staff, also present), Paul Cunha/AMC, Paul Fitzgerald/for Public, Derek Ibarguen/WMNF, Paul Ingersoll/for Public, Jack Middleton/MWObs, Wayne Presby/Cog Railway, Drew Scamman/Townsquare Media, and Howie Wemyss/Auto Road.

Also in attendance were Allen Brooks/AG Office for MWC, Brooke Brown/WMNF-Pemigewasset Dist. Ranger, Donna Dunn/MWObs Interim Exec. Director, Michael Haley/AG Office for DNCR, Patrick Hummel/MWSP, Rob Kirsch/MWObs, Prof. Tim Lewis/Northern VT University, Gary MacDonald/MWObs Trustee, Tom Mansfield/DNCR, Seth Prescott/DNCR, Joshua Sjoström/WMNF-Androscoggin Dist. Ranger, Commissioner Sarah Stewart/DNCR, Deputy Diane Taliaferro/WMNF, Edith Tucker/Berlin Sun, and Torene Tango-Lowy/MWC clerk.

Minutes. Mr Middleton moved to accept the minutes of August 28, 2020; seconded by Mr Ingersoll. The minutes were approved as written by roll call YES vote by Mr Bergeron, Sen Bradley, Dir Bryce, Mr Cunha, Mr Fitzgerald, Supv. Ibarguen, Mr Ingersoll, Mr Middleton, Mr Presby, Mr Scamman, and Mr Wemyss.

Capital Improvements. Mr Mansfield reported that the water system upgrade project would replace the water tanks and located them behind the Sherman Adams Building (SAB) for a single, year-round configuration. The estimated \$975K project is in the FY2022-2023 capital budget.

The Governor's Office gave the approval to continue work on the sewage treatment project and Underwood Engineering is working on the final design in preparation for the bid process in July/Aug, with a contract to Governor and Executive Council (G&C) by October. The project estimate is \$2.3-\$2.9M, with \$1.87M requested in the capital budget. Land & Water Conservation Funds (LWCF) can be used as match and Dir Bryce said LWCF funding decisions are made by the Commissioner. Phase I would start in summer 2022, for site work and foundation. Phase II, in summer 2023, is the treatment plant installation, testing and fine-tuning its operation. Mr Bergeron had chaired the Sewer & Water Subcommittee that met on Sept 21st. They reviewed the study and found the recommendations appropriate. When asked if the schedule could be moved up, Mr Mansfield said he would discuss it with Underwood, but he thought the project schedule was realistic.

In answer to questions, Mr Prescott said the new sewer treatment system would support a capacity of 350K visitors/season. The system is based on Underwood's study of the current sewer treatment plant, using three years of data and the highest seven-day flow. A full-time, licensed level II operator will be hired to run the system. Mr Mansfield spoke more about the water system project. Sen Bradley is on the Capital Budget Committee and, although the State will need to meet its budget, this project should be a priority.

State Park Report & Operating Plan Review. Dir Bryce said that the Parks Comparison Report for Week 22 shows Mt Washington's concession revenue off by 49% at \$660K, compared to 2019. However, 2019 was a record year at \$1.2M. Mr Hummel added that building capacity was reduced by 75%, due to COVID precautions. Chair Bradley agreed that the summit partners have had to manage a difficult situation this year.

Admission fee. Chair Bradley had held off on a subcommittee meeting while waiting for an analysis from Comm Stewart and Dir Bryce. Their memo, "*Admission fee proposal for consideration*" was sent to members today for comments. Comm Stewart would like fees to be fair and equitable for all visitors, everyone needs to contribute to ensure a good experience, return visits, and investments into the property. Dir Bryce said that he and the MWObs continue their discussions on the lease, including an amendment to allow the State to charge fees, yet have the museum be an integral part of the visitor experience. The Fiscal Committee approves state park fees and Parks solicits support from the Governor's Office. Parks is looking at all its fees, which haven't changed since 2012, but expenses have increased, especially at the seacoast and with investments in the Enterprise Reservation System. The Reservation System has been successful under the COVID restrictions and can help manage capacity for the SAB. The memo outlines discussion points for the MWC. Partner support and coordination, and public messaging can provide a seamless visitor experience.

The members agreed that a small working group is needed to address questions, such as how a reservation system might work, the changing relationship between Park and the MWObs and their lease, and pricing. Chair Bradley said that bringing a proposal to the Fiscal Committee by the partners will be important.

Chair Bradley appointed to the subcommittee: Mr Presby, Mr Wemyss, Mr Middleton and Ms Dunn, Mr Cunha, Sen Bradley, with the Commissioner and Dir Bryce serve as leads.

Ventilation. Mr Middleton reported that the MWObs lost its summer revenue due to the COVID restrictions at the summit. Summit revenue is critical to the MWObs and he's concerned that losses will continue if the ventilation system is not addressed timely. He proposes a request for authorization from the MWC to enable the use of MWObs restricted funds as an emergency allocation towards the short-term ventilation solution. Mr Mansfield provided an update on the project. DNCR is required to work through the Bureau of Public Works. They held an onsite meeting with the consultant in August and are waiting for the temporary and long-term ventilation design recommendations. Mr Middleton said the MWObs could provide funding assistance if that would help move the project forward. Ms Dunn will resend the MWObs financial report that show the balance in the Summit museum restricted fund account. The Mr Brooks will review the MWObs lease to determine if the restricted fund account could be used for this purpose.

Chair Bradley will schedule a MWC meeting on Jan 29, 2021. The agenda will include the temporary ventilation design solution and cost; the AG's determination on use of the MWObs restricted funds; and, if applicable, a vote of the MWC to authorize MWObs use of its restricted fund towards the temporary ventilation solution for implementation by May 2021. The Fee Subcommittee report will also be discussed.

Mr Hummel reported that the last day of operation was Oct 12. Although it may have been inconvenient to turn visitors away due to the reduced capacity, there were no COVID cases linked to the summit. He thanked the Cog, Auto Road and Obs for the coordinated effort under the difficult circumstances.

Partner Reports. AMC. Mr Cunha introduced himself, replacing Chris Thayer. This was a challenging year for AMC with the huts closed and providing only limited services. T6he shelters were opened in July, but unstaffed. They saw high trail use, and were able to deploy the professional and volunteer trail crews to address the maintenance backlog.

Auto Road. Mr Wemyss said that there were lots of changes this year, with big events and hiker shuttles cancelled. They opened the first week in June, but guided tours are off by 87% and attendance down by 11% from 2019. Like many others, they are having difficulty with staffing levels going into winter operations.

MWObs. Ms Dunn reported that it's been a challenging year. Although both museums are closed, they were able to obtain COVID relief grants and loans. Some of the MWObs exhibits will be on loan to the McAuliffe-Shepard Discovery Center in Concord. MWObs is working on its 2021 operating plans.

Cog Railway. Mr Presby agreed that 2020 was a challenging year. They limited capacity to 50%, opening on June 20th. Revenue is down by 50%. They completed rebuilding the rail line and will complete cleanup in the spring. The Cog hopes to be operating in the winter, but it will be dependent upon demand.

WMNF. Forest Supervisor Ibarque introduced himself. He is originally from Maine and is glad to be back at the WMNF. They have had similar experiences in operations with an increase in use by new visitors. The Avalanche Center is operating this winter and they have submitted their projects to Congress for funding under the Great American Outdoors Act. He introduced Brooke Brown, Pemigewasset District Ranger and Joshua Sjostrom, Androscoggin District Ranger.

Townsquare Media. Mr Scamman said they can help with a PSA (Public Service Announcement) program to announce any new fees.

AOB. Chair Bradley provided a recap. The next meeting is scheduled on Jan 29, 2021, at 10 a.m. by videoconference. The agenda will include: 1) an update on the temporary ventilation system design, 2) the AG's response as to whether the lease would allow the MWObs to use its restricted account towards the ventilation system, and 3) a status on MWObs funding account, so that the MWC can vote on the measure. The agenda will also include an update by the Admission Fee Subcommittee.

Adjourn. Mr Wemyss MOVED to adjourn; SECONDED by Mr Bergeron. The meeting adjourned at 2:50 p.m.

Submitted by T. Tango-Lowy, MWC clerk.