

Mount Washington Commission Comments on Master Plan Draft of 7-5-2022

The last approved Master Plan for the summit of Mount Washington is dated 1970. In the ensuing decades, most of the recommendations established then have been carried out. Speaking as someone who recalls conditions on the mountain and in what is today Mount Washington State Park at that time, the transformation has been remarkable, and some recognition could be given in a new Master Plan for the vast improvement in conditions on and around the summit. Not only have the summit buildings and water, sewage disposal and electrical infrastructure been transformed in accordance with the 1970 plan, but both the Auto Road and the Cog Railway have improved their operations substantially. The Cog Railway in particular deserves much credit for its years-long cleanup of its right of way from base to summit and for its fuel conversion that has had a substantial impact on air quality in the region. The hiking trails that lead to the summit, while heavily used, are generally in better condition than in the 1970s following extensive hardening in that and succeeding decades.

Although the Mount Washington summit has been intensively inhabited since before the Civil War, and conditions are much improved, past progress does not absolve the state from the imperative to continue to protect the environmental values of the park and to anticipate and provide for continued high usage of the summit. While it may be unrealistic to ask private companies to dial back their promotion, it would be a step toward sustainability for state tourism agencies to focus their messaging on other, lesser visited parks and attractions than Mount Washington.

IV: Operation and Maintenance

A: Environment, Summit Assessment, and Aesthetics

It was stated in public session in North Conway on August 22, 2022 that all commission members support an environmental assessment of the summit area, and that funding for that assessment will be requested from the legislature. This assessment will be an important precursor to the eventual plan and the commission should work quickly toward obtaining funding. Since the funding process and assessment itself will take a period of time, perhaps several years, if more is known by then about the status of the Cog Railway's plans outside of the summit circle, the potential effects of that project on buildings and usage within the summit circle should be included as part of the assessment. Insights and recommendations arising from the assessment should be incorporated into the final Master Plan.

In its discussion of structures, the Master Plan draft emphasizes avoiding additional unnecessary structures. Making full use of underused existing structures should be a part of this effort. The Tip-Top House is presently closed to the public, yet as suggested (but never carried out) in the 1970 Master Plan, could provide educational exhibits on the history of the summit.

B: Operation of the Summit Generally

The assessment of existing conditions should provide a more accurate approximation of numbers of annual visitors than the Master Plan draft. While the draft mentions that railway and auto road visitors are "well over 100,000," the 5-year visitation numbers from each company on the commission's website give solid counts that could be referenced either as 5-year averages or by one-year statistics. It is important to generate a much more accurate estimate of numbers of hikers arriving in the summit circle. Since only four hiking trails enter the park, it may be

feasible to establish a statistically valid sample of hikers coming into the summit circle by actual count if a group like the Student Conservation Association can be recruited.

The excerpt from the Coos County Registry of Deeds on page 6 of the draft suggests that no limits can be placed on the number of people accessing the summit via foot, auto or railway. It would be extremely valuable to add a statement from the commission's legal representative on the deed restriction so that the final plan is completely clear to laymen on whether or not a limit on visitation is an option.

V: Capital Improvements

B: Accessibility and Inclusiveness:

The draft states that "Mount Washington is one of only two of New Hampshire's forty-eight "four-thousand-footers" with non-hiker access." To ensure the credibility of the Master Plan, this should be amended to recognize that the summit of nearby 4,050-foot Wildcat D is accessible by chairlift in summer and winter.

C: Enhanced Visitor Experience within Structures

There is little available wall space within the Sherman Adams Building to exhibit interpretive displays of historical content as suggested, nor is there excess floor space to install freestanding display panels for the same purpose. There is however sufficient unused space in the Tip-Top House for such freestanding exhibit panels with historical content to be shown, without using wall-mounted exhibits that could detract from the historic sense of the restored interior of the building. If exhibit material is to be considered for Tip-Top House, it should avoid repetition with content presented in the Observatory's museum.

D: Trails

The concept of a short, smooth, largely level trail around the summit that provides visitors with views to various directions should be endorsed. Construction of such a trail could be done similar to the stone and ledge pack gravel path built with short switchbacks that leads to the entrance of the Tip-Top House. The provision of such a walking path would be helpful in dispersing crowding in buildings in appropriate weather and would enhance the experience for visitors.

F: Water and Waste

Since deed restrictions prevent limitations on visitation to the summit as stated on page 6, it is critical that basic sanitary services for the numbers of visitors that do arrive be adequate and well-maintained. The assessment to be prepared before the final Master Plan should report on progress of the modernization of the water and sewage disposal system referenced in the Master Plan draft. The restrooms in the Sherman Adams Building have long been inadequate for the demand on even moderately busy days, and plans and funds to expand them should be a priority.

The management of the summit is a highly complex series of interlocking interests and issues, which is likely why no new Master Plans have been presented since 1970. It is encouraging that the commission has developed a draft plan; it is important to the reputation of the State of New Hampshire that a final version be refined, accepted and implemented in the near future.

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