

Virtual Local Business Meetings with Glacier National Park, January 2021

Meeting Notes

Meeting Overview

During the last week of January 2021, Glacier National Park Superintendent Jeff Mow hosted three virtual meetings with business members of the local tourism community to engage in conversation about Glacier National Park's 2021 visitor season. Representatives of the Montana Delegation and the Governor's office attended the first meeting. A representative from the Montana Department of Transportation attended the second two meetings. Not including NPS employees, a total of 132 participants attended the meetings over the three meeting dates.

Meeting Dates:

- Wednesday, January 27, 2021, from 3 pm to 4:15 pm (east side local businesses)
- Thursday, January 28, 2021, from 1 pm to 2:15 pm (west side local businesses)
- Friday, January 29, 2021, from 10 am to 11:15 am (local chambers)

Superintendent Jeff Mow's Presentation Summary

Review of 2020

- 2020 was a year like no other due to the impacts of Covid-19. The summer season started with reopening of the west side of the park. Wet and rainy conditions in June resulted in a later opening for the Going-to-the-Sun Road.

2020 Visitation Trends

- Over the full year, the park saw a 40% reduction in visitation for 2020 compared to 2019.
- In terms of the amount of traffic entering from the west, activity levels at the West entrance were almost the same as they were in 2019.
- Once we got past July, things seemed to settle down a little bit in August. But that was followed by a spike in visitation around Labor Day, which caused acute congestion issues, particularly along Highway 2. We had reports of people waiting in line on Highway 2 for an hour just to get turned around at the West Entrance to the park. We are looking at how we can avoid this kind of acute congestion in 2021.
- In 2020, we also saw late season visitation increase, which is not the normal trend for visitation during the off-season.

Month	2019 Recreation Visits by Month	2020 Recreation Visits by Month	Percent Change
October	78,408	125,544	60.12%
November	20,008	29,366	46.77%
December	15,137	28,196	86.27%

Visitation data source: [STATS - Park Reports \(nps.gov\)](https://www.nps.gov/stats)

2021 Overview

- 2021 is not looking like an immediate return to normalcy a lot of people were hoping for. COVID-19 continues to influence when and how our visitors come and how we're able to do business.
- There are still many unknowns about the 2021 season. What will the executive mask order for Federal Lands look like in parks and outdoor settings? Will there be testing available like we saw last year with the asymptomatic testing that was available at the beginning of the summer? Will the border between the US and Canada open and if so, when?
- We have had a lot of questions about the prospect of the east side being open. The closure last year was due to public health. We had direction from the Secretary of Interior to cooperate with State and local county health officials on whether the park is open or closed. It was a unanimous decision of County, State and Federal public health officials to close the park initially last March and then to keep the east side closed last June. Both the tribe and the park are working towards the east side to be open.
- We have heard loud and clear the degree of economic impact having the east side closed has on local businesses.
- We are coordinating with the tribal council, state, local, and federal health officials as the Blackfoot Tribe moves through their phased reopening. If the reopening of the reservation continues to progress, the park will reopen the east side in subsequent phases.

2021 Services and Operations

- Concessions: Concessioners are planning to open, and most businesses are taking reservations.
- Transit System: We are hoping to run a shuttle system, but it may not look like the shuttle system you are used to. We have COVID-19 requirements for physical distancing that will influence the capacity of shuttles. We are still looking at if running the shuttles will make sense considering such requirements.
- Employee Housing: Our ability to house seasonal employees is reduced significantly. We have been directed to follow the COVID-19 mitigation protocol of housing one person per bedroom, which influences the facilities and services we can offer inside the park.
- Campgrounds: We're committed to having Fish Creek open as we did last year. We are working hard to ensure Apgar is open this year. It is less certain if we can operate Sprague or Avalanche, Bowman, and Kintla Campgrounds. For east side campgrounds, at this point we are committed to operating Many Glacier Campground as a reservation only campground. Currently we are not taking reservations for St. Mary Campground as we evaluate our ability to operate our east side campgrounds. It is looking good that we will have facilities open at Two Medicine.

2021 Construction

- Many Glacier: We are going into our second year of construction on the Many Glacier Road rehabilitation project. There will be construction related delays. The contractor is required to ensure that none of the delays exceed 40 minutes in length, cumulatively across the construction area. To

facilitate early season construction, the Many Glacier Valley will be closed to public access until May 28.

- Camas Road: There will be construction taking place on the Camas Road throughout the summer. There will be delays that shouldn't exceed 30 minutes in length, cumulatively across the construction area.
- Lake McDonald Utilities Project: There's a possibility we will have a utility project going on the east side of Lake McDonald, replacing the utility system that dates back to the 1970s. If we get the funding we're in line for, that project could begin in October and go through the winter.
- Highway 2: Highway 2 is going to have pavement preservation and some other work taking place on Highway 2 between Hungry Horse and Essex. Glacier National Park is coordinating with the State of Montana Department of Transportation and Big Sky Public Relations. Expect pilot cars with delays throughout the construction area for most of the summer. Additional stakeholder meetings will take place over the next few months.

Ticketed Entry

- Because of the upcoming Highway 2 construction, anticipated visitation levels for 2021, and the impacts of last summer's congestion along Highway 2, the park is reconsidering implementation of ticketed entry for the Going-to-the-Sun Road Corridor in 2021. This would be a pilot implementation and would not necessarily be continued beyond 2021.
- Last summer the park considered implementing ticketed entry as a result of early summer congestion. At the time the business community's support was tepid at best, primarily due to the lack of lead time. The park had other considerations which resulted in a decision not to implement.
- From last summer's unique circumstance of the Going-to-the-Sun Road operating as a one-way in one-way out opportunity, we learned that if more than 1700 vehicles entered the corridor by 10 AM (classified as very busy), congestion would result in closures in and around the West entrance of the park. Most of the daily visitation in August was busy but never reached the threshold of where we would have run out of reservations under last summer's proposal. The threshold would have been exceeded during the six day spike in visitation around Labor Day when backups along Highway 2 were prevalent.
- Last Fall I was asked by two of the local Chamber groups to revisit the issue of ticketed entry. We anticipate having additional discussion around ticketed entry over the next two months.

Recreate Responsibly

- Last summer we saw a lot of visitors and indications were that many were not savvy visitors to public lands. We saw a lot of issues with garbage, human waste, and dogs where they are not supposed to be. We also saw dispersed camping issues. There's a small workgroup amongst the agencies – the Forest Service, Park Service and state parks – that are looking at some of the critical issues that we saw last summer to develop a recreate responsibly message. This would be a

summertime message focused on what it means to recreate responsibly on public lands. It's great to see new demographics coming to use public lands. Hopefully this educational effort can help make a difference on the impacts we see on the resource.

Key Discussion Highlights from Each Meeting

During each of the three meetings, several topics became a focus of the meeting's discussion but not necessarily a focus for all three meetings. Here are the key topics that emerged during one or more of the meetings.

Highway 2 Construction

Bob Vosen, District Administrator for the Missoula District of the Montana Department of Transportation and representatives from Big Sky Public Relations joined the Thursday and Friday business meetings and shared the following information on Highway 2 construction, planned for 2021.

- The overall project is actually three different projects tied together by the area they are taking place between Hungry Horse to a location near Essex during 2021. The project is anticipated to take place from early May until October. Some of the work is weather sensitive and temperature sensitive which impacts when the work can occur.
- The project is focused on maintenance and is not set up to add new features to the road, like increasing turning lanes. The construction project focuses on pavement preservation. Pavement preservation is the process used to keep roads in reasonably good condition. Guardrails will also be replaced and updated.
- MDT plans to utilize a smart traffic control system, which is a system of signs that have a radar detection capability on them so we can tell when traffic is backing up to potentially trigger some messaging for traffic further down the road. The goal is to keep delays to 15 minutes or less. However, that could be challenging if/when there is a crush of traffic. There are some pinch points that will need pilot cars.
- Amy Aiello (amy@bigskypublicrelations.com) is an account executive at Big Sky Public Relations and will be acting as communication manager for this project. Big Sky PR has been working on a robust public involvement strategy and stakeholder outreach is a key part of that strategy. Part of the communication plan is to meet directly with businesses. Once the contractor is onboard, and a few weeks before construction begins, Amy will be putting together a series of public meetings. There will also be a hotline available, 9 am to 5 pm, Monday through Friday.

East Side Closure

- The decision to keep the east side entrances closed was made in collaboration with tribal, state, county, and federal governments. The tribe does not have the authority to close Glacier National

Park. As good neighbors, we supported the tribes need to protect their population and in the interest of public safety.

East Side Access

- We are coordinating with the tribal council and state, local, and federal health officials as the Tribe moves through their phased reopening. If the reopening of the reservation continues to progress, the park will reopen the east side in subsequent phases.

COVID-19 Vaccinations for Glacier NPS Employees

- Vaccines will be made available to park employees per the State's vaccine phases. We are not in a position to require any employee to take it.