



Juneau Commission on Sustainability

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To: Appropriate subcommittee chair??

Through: Denise Koch, Director of Engineering and Public Facilities

From: Marian Call and Griffin Plush, Co-Chairs, Juneau Commission on Sustainability

Subject: Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area Staffing

Date: March to-do, 2025

The Juneau Commission on Sustainability (JCOS) is concerned that inadequate staffing at the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area (MGRA) will lead to significant degradation of one of Juneau's most treasured sites for both locals and our tourist industry. While the situation is evolving and it may turn out that no action is warranted, the time for contingency planning is now.

Background

In 2023 the MGRA hosted around 700,000 visitors, mostly cruise passengers arriving by bus. Per the Juneau Empire, 19 staff were expected to work there this summer picking up trash, keeping people away from bears, and responding to disasters such as another Jökulhlaup. As of this writing, all but one of those people have been fired or had their seasonal contracts terminated.

What happens next is unknown. Many lawsuits are underway that may restore staffing. The US Forest Service may decide to close the MGRA for the season. However, in 2019 during a government shutdown the previous Trump administration ordered some federal recreation areas to remain open without staff, leading to significant problems including copious littering, vandalism, environmental damage caused by unauthorized use of offroad vehicles, and build-up of human waste in outhouses. Attempting to host over half a million guests at an understaffed MGRA would be a disaster.

Recommendations

With so much unknown, it is premature for CBJ to take drastic actions. However, with only one month until the first cruise ships arrive now is definitely time to begin contingency planning. JCOS suggests that the City Manager be tasked with developing a plan, and offers the following possibilities to consider including therein:

- Approach the USFS about a Memorandum of Agreement that would allow CBJ staff to perform essential functions at the MGRA
- Change the way tour companies operate, either through negotiation or conditions attached to locally issued permits and licenses:
 - Reduce the number of visitors per day
 - Require visitors to travel with guided groups instead of allowing them to roam independently
- In the event that the facility cannot be managed responsibly, close Glacier Spur Road at the intersection with Gladstone Street

It is not sustainable to operate a massive tourist attraction without trash disposal, clean restrooms, and rangers to keep people away from bears or warn them when the lake levels start rising. The worst-case scenario would be hundreds of people trapped near Nugget Falls as the trail is already inundated and waters continue to rise. Our sincere hope is that USFS resolves staffing issues and is able to operate as usual, but if they cannot do that then it is up to CBJ to protect human safety and the environment.