

Planning for the Future of the Eagle River Nature Center – Master Site Development Plan Concepts Comments

July 7, 2010

Site Planning- Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, Design and Construction

<i>Comment number and Subject</i>	<i>Issue Statement / Public Comment</i>	<i>Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation(DPOR) Response</i>
<p>1. <i>Work with what we have</i></p>	<p>Why does the ERNC want to start completely from scratch, eliminating the entire existing infrastructure, building entirely new roads, new initial trail access and of course new buildings?</p>	<p><i>The Eagle River Nature Center’s board members and staff (ERNC) have always tried to work with what we have. We built a large yurt to serve as a classroom space. We built 3 storage sheds and a Quonset hut to store our trail equipment, educational materials, gardening supplies, and maintenance supplies. This band-aid solution has worked, but with great inconvenience to our staff, volunteers and program attendees. For instance, the yurt is much too cold during the winter months. These add-on facilities have helped, but overall, they have made operations inefficient and labor intensive. ERNC had a builder look at designing a classroom addition to the existing facility. To do this, windows in the main space would need to be eliminated; the back gardens and outside area would be considerably reduced; and the original facility would need to be updated to current standards and codes (electrical, mechanical, structural, ADA). This would be very costly and we would still have too few restrooms, no space for coats and student’s backpacks/lunches; the same parking challenges; a trail that is no longer ADA compliant; and scattered maintenance and storage facilities.</i></p> <p><i>A new building could consolidate these spaces under one roof and</i></p>

		<p><i>make operations more unified, building systems more energy efficient, and provide the types of spaces needed for a nature center. Please keep in mind that the building was once a bar and later renovated by State Parks to be a visitor facility in the early 80's. The work was done by a passionate group of State Park individuals who converted it into the lovely space we all know. Unfortunately, over the years, they too realized that the space had significant limitations. As the population has grown and as the ERNC's work with school children and families has increased, so too, has the need to provide more space for these activities. It is not ERNC's intent to construct a grandiose facility. ERNC has looked at an optimal plan as a starting point. ERNC would like a small, efficient and economically viable building which maintains the character of the existing building and addresses the inadequacies of the current situation.</i></p>
<p>2. Project Scope</p>	<p>Of the options put forth to the public they have footprints that are beyond the scope of the mission of the Eagle River Nature Center, and the needs and desires of the most frequent users.</p>	<p><i>The footprint shown in Concept C is an optimal one, but not necessarily the size that would be built. Construction costs, operating costs, and other issues that are sure to arise in the next phase of development (architectural, engineering) are yet to be evaluated. ERNC prefers a facility which requires the least amount of staff to operate and satisfies the needs and desires of our community</i></p> <p><i>As our population grows, more improvements will need to be made in our Park. It is our responsibility as a public agency to do our best to follow our Mission* and to provide outdoor recreation opportunities. There is a need for park improvements to promote outreach, education and interpretation. Good planning and</i></p>

		<p><i>management can set the foundation.</i></p> <p><i>* The Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation provides outdoor recreation opportunities and conserves and interprets natural, cultural, and historic resources for the use, enjoyment and welfare of the people.</i></p>
3. Entrance Road	In Concept C there is a divided entrance road, what purpose does it serve? Perhaps it is for slowing traffic however, what would DOT recommend?	<i>The intention of the divided entrance is to slow traffic and to offer the visitor a sense of arrival. By dividing the entrance DPOR is better able to buffer the road and offer a more 'park like feel' to the entrance. DOT will be consulted regarding this design.</i>
4. Site B - racetrack	DPOR should consider minimizing impacts to the slough from onsite activities related both to construction and future operations of the planned facility. By pulling the facility back from the slough and sighting it in the cover of the woodlands is to invoke visitor curiosity and wonder – exactly what a nature center is intended to do. While Option C provides the greatest buffer, the less than 1200' proposed seems far less than adequate.	<p><i>DPOR has designed the facility the greatest distance from the slough as possible while maintaining as much of the natural vegetation.</i></p> <p><i>DPOR and ERNC agree that the approach to a new nature center should do its best to invoke curiosity and wonder. It is our hope that this can be accomplished using Concept C site plan. This plan will help guide the architectural planners in the next phase. Ultimately, the scale of the facility will be dependant on environmental and economic factors and community desires.</i></p>
5. Concept C- Wildlife	The nature center, outdoor classroom, and most of the parking is perched on an artificial bluff. If the new slope is relatively steep and at least 40-60 feet high it may deflect most brown bears away from areas heavily used by visitors.	<i>DPOR has taken into account the presence of black and brown bears in the area. Although it is nearly impossible to restrict migration patterns of bears, placing the Nature Center away from the stream and feeding areas will hopefully deter bear activity around the Nature Center facilities.</i>
6. Concept C	After evaluating the three alternatives, ADF&G recommends Concept C as the preferred alternative in regards to habitat and potential	<i>No comment needed.</i>

	brown bear and human interactions.	
7. Concept C - support	Concept C works for the following primary reasons; it minimizes noise and visual impacts to neighbors of the ERNC; it minimizes the overall footprint while meeting the ERNC's future infrastructure needs; and it pulls the footprint away from the existing clear water slough habitat and its associated natural resources.	<i>Concept C is intended to minimize the impacts to the surrounding landscape by designing a more compact parking and building area. By utilizing existing disturbed areas, Concept C successfully nestles the infrastructure into the landscape.</i>
8. Concept C - Parking / Buffer	If there is no feasible alternative to a Phase II parking area, then consider a parking area located on top of the bluff. If this cannot be done, the proposed surface drainage retention ponds could be redesigned to provide somewhat of a buffer between the proposed Phase II parking area and brown bears. If the ponds were combined and wrapped, in an "L" shape, around the Phase II parking lot, the relatively deep water may deter bear movement along the toe of the new slope, through the parking lot, and may deflect a charging bear, responding from the woods to human activity on the parking lot. The pond would have to be at least 6 feet deep and 20 feet across to enhance its potential as a barrier. There is no guarantee that this barrier would be 100% effective, which is why sitting the entire facility on the bluff is preferable.	<i>DPOR has considered many alternatives to the location of parking, however, due to site limitations, the bluff is not a preferred location for an overflow parking location. The retention ponds will be examined in greater depth in the next phase to determine their potential as a barrier.</i> <i>All areas within the Upper Eagle River Valley, including the existing bluff that the Nature Center is built on, are bear territory. Bears are often seen on the bluff, as well as, below the bluff.</i>
9. Concept C - security	The ERNC and DPOR need to provide for security at the new ERNC- The relocation of the main ERNC as shown in concept C requires adequate security monitoring and even on-site caretaker year round. A motorized gate, security monitoring on the entry	<i>The ERNC currently has an on-site winter caretaker and on-site summer host volunteers. The parking areas would be designed with security gates and the issue of having security monitoring has been brought to the attention of DPOR and the ERNC.</i>

	road and all access points from the ERNC trails to the ERNC building-especially during winter months when access from the Briggs Bridge to the ERNC via the frozen Eagle River is possible need to be included in any final plan.	
10. Building / Buffer	If the nature center building is going to be torn down, it's very important to my family that we look down on a beautiful landscaped area, and do not see maintenance buildings, or hear maintenance noise.	<i>DPOR and ERNC agree that the maintenance facility should be "tucked away" from view and to minimize disturbance to neighboring residences. We feel that this can be accomplished in a creative and beautiful manner.</i>
11. Building	It is in the best interest of DPOR to present cost/maintenance choices in looking at the type of building you ultimately choose at the Site C.	<i>DPOR and the ERNC agree that this is essential during the next phase. Funding for the next phase (architectural, cost analysis, operational analysis) has yet to be secured and will be dependant on the mutual consensus of the community, Alaska State Parks and the ERNC.</i>
12. Building	The new building for the ERNC should not be a log building, instead something more sustainable.	<i>DPOR and the ERNC have not decided on a method of construction for the new Nature Center. The intent of the new structure is to hold the characteristics of a log structure without necessarily being log.</i>
13. Maintenance Area	The maintenance area would be best located on the existing racetrack area near the proposed parking lots, instead of near the private road in Concept C.	<i>The location for the maintenance area in Concept C was chosen for its relationship to the trails and building.</i>
14. Alternate Option	DPOR should consider of a lower-impact fourth option that would build a new building in the existing location. A new parking lot could be created on a terrace below, where the current utility road is. This parking lot could be used for over-flow only purposes, allowing maintenance	<i>The existing location was determined to be too small an area to accommodate future needs. Conflicts of this site include: private residential road access, steep trail grade no longer satisfies new ADA requirements, and nature center operations would need to be halted for an indefinite amount of time.</i>

	efforts and costs to be kept at a minimum.	
15. Visitor Use	The proposed concepts, with their large footprints, sacrifice the existing unique quality—threatening to make the ERNC just another wasted area targeted at summer visitors, rather than Alaskan families.	<i>The ERNC feels that a new building can be designed in a way that maintains the warm atmosphere of the current facility. Classroom space and adequate public facilities (restrooms, coat area, parking, etc) should make the center even more attractive to Alaskan families. It is a priority for the ERNC that the design will improve on the inadequacies of the current facility and replicate the parts that make it so special.</i>