

STATEMENT OF SUE MASICA, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, PARK PLANNING, FACILITIES, AND LANDS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, CONCERNING DISABILITY ACCESS IN THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM.

MAY 11, 2006

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on the status of accessibility for people with disabilities in the National Park System. We are pleased to discuss the status of the National Park Service (NPS) Accessibility Management Program, the goals and objectives of our program, our accomplishments over the past several years, and the initiatives underway for future and continuing improvements.

The NPS is strongly committed to the principle of accessibility in our National Park units. We believe that the essence of this goal is to ensure, to the highest degree that is practical and feasible, that the nation's 54 million citizens with disabilities have the same opportunities to visit and experience the wonders of the National Park System that are afforded to all other citizens. The inclusion of the terms "practical and feasible" is important, because in some instances, the very nature of the environment that we manage poses some inherent restrictions to full accessibility.

In 1916, Congress created the NPS to "promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks, monuments, and reservations," and to "conserve" the resources and values in these areas "unimpaired" for the enjoyment of future generations. At the same time, the NPS is required by the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 and Title V of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, to ensure that our facilities and programs are accessible to and usable by citizens with disabilities. To address these sometimes competing legislative mandates, the NPS has approached the issue of accessibility in parks in a comprehensive and organized way, rather than on a project-by-project basis, through the creation of the Accessibility Management Program. The primary goal of the program is to develop and coordinate a systemwide, comprehensive approach to achieving the highest level of accessibility that is practical, while ensuring consistency with the other legal mandates of conservation and protection of the resources we manage.

In 1980, the NPS began and has continued to work with accessibility coordinators in the parks and at each regional and program office, to assess the level of accessibility at each park; to identify the barriers to accessibility; to develop policies and guidelines regarding appropriate methods and techniques for improving access; to provide technical assistance and in-service training on effective approaches and program implementation; and to take action on an on-going basis at the individual park level to eliminate identified barriers.

We have made these efforts, not only because it is required by law, but also because it is our desire that all citizens, including those with disabilities, have the opportunity to work in, visit and enjoy the wonders of this nation's natural and cultural treasures. Providing optimal levels of

accessibility and opportunities in the programs and facilities of the National Park System have been reinforced over the past few years by the issuance of departmental regulations, additions to the NPS Management Policies, and the development of Director's Orders.

The primary approach that we have used over the past several years is to charge each superintendent with the responsibility of ensuring that each park is in compliance with the appropriate legal requirements and with NPS policy regarding accessibility. This has involved evaluating their facilities and programs to determine the level of access and to implement actions on an annual basis by utilizing appropriated funds, fee revenues and other funds available to the parks to make required modifications. This strategy involves ensuring that as new facilities and programs are developed, they are in compliance; and as existing facilities and programs are altered or renovated, that they are made accessible according to the appropriate standards or guidelines. We have also established an extensive program to provide technical assistance and continuing education in order to assist the park staff in better understanding the legal requirements, and the methods and techniques for ensuring that alterations are made appropriately. Under this approach, every park in the National Park System has made progress in identifying and correcting deficiencies.

One program that had a positive effect on improving accessibility in our facilities is the recreation fee program, which was instituted as the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program in 1997 and replaced by the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act in 2004. The recreation fee program authorizes 100 percent of the revenue generated by charging fees to be returned to the NPS, with 80 percent remaining at the site where it is collected and 20 percent to be used servicewide at the Director's discretion. In FY 2001, the NPS Director allocated \$5 million of the 20 percent fee revenues to address accessibility needs in the low revenue and non-collecting parks. The \$5 million in fee revenues funded over 120 projects in all regions and in over 100 different parks in FY 2002. We are proposing that a similar program be set up for FY 2007.

In addition to the \$5 million of the 20 percent fee revenues, the NPS has worked to ensure that accessibility improvements are included in any project that involves the alteration to an existing facility or building. From FY 2001 through FY 2005, over 800 projects were funded through the recreation fee program (both 80 percent and 20 percent) that included accessibility as a part of the project. This constitutes approximately 25 percent of the funded projects each year and totals over \$140 million. These projects have funded improvements in campgrounds, picnic areas, overlooks, trails, visitor centers, interpretive media, interpretive programs, and transportation systems.

Some examples of park projects funded with recreation fees include Cowpens National Battlefield in South Carolina, where the visitor center was modified to meet access standards for employees and visitors, including replacing the 21-year-old information desk, reconfiguring parking spaces, installing an elevator and producing Braille and audio tapes to enable visually impaired visitors to experience the exhibits. At Joshua Tree National Park in California, the Hidden Valley day-use area was rehabilitated by paving 900 linear feet of access road, developing four new accessible picnic sites, and constructing 1,420 linear feet of hard surfaced accessible walkways.

Our goal is to ensure that visitors with disabilities can visit the parks, and to the greatest extent practical, have access to the same experiences and services provided to all visitors. We have made substantial progress towards this goal, but more still remains to be done. We have identified several barriers to reaching full compliance and we are working to address them so that we can continue to improve the level of access in our parks.

First, a large percentage of the infrastructure of the NPS, including the administrative buildings and visitor contact stations, was constructed in the early 1960's. Our asset database reveals that we have 18,700 buildings currently in active use in the National Park System, of which many were constructed before 1968 when the Architectural Barriers Act (which requires access in Federal construction) was enacted. This means that a high percentage of these buildings were constructed without consideration for accessibility. Consequently, we have the challenge of having to alter access barriers in a high percentage of older facilities, which in many cases do not lend themselves to easy modifications. We are currently involved in a major program to conduct Comprehensive Condition Assessments of the NPS infrastructure and to determine the corrective actions needed to bring these structures into compliance with the current requirements.

Second, 30 percent of the buildings and structures of the NPS are on the National Register of Historic Places. This does not exempt them from accessibility requirements, but does add an additional layer of review and deliberation in order to determine ways to provide access, while at the same time, preserving and protecting the historically significant features and landscapes. The process for finding this balance is set forth in several Federal regulations dating back to 1984. We are making some progress, such as the installation of an interior elevator to access the great meeting hall at Boston National Historical Park's Faneuil Hall or the elimination of steps and the installation of accessible walkways to historic buildings at Fort Vancouver National Historical Park in Washington State.

Third, many of the units of the National Park System consist of natural and undeveloped lands, including campgrounds and trails that pose some additional difficulties in providing access while also preserving and protecting the environment. It is important to note that official access standards for many of these types of facilities do not currently exist. The NPS has been working closely with other land-managing agencies and the U.S. Access Board in the development of official guidelines for these facilities. While these guidelines are being developed, we are still attempting to make these facilities as accessible as is practical. For example, at White Sands National Monument in New Mexico, Americorps volunteers worked with the NPS to construct a new 900-foot wheelchair-accessible interdune boardwalk. This boardwalk guides visitors through a vegetated area between sand dunes to an overlook that affords a panoramic view of the world's largest gypsum sand dune field. NPS staff and volunteers provide one-on-one interpretation to visitors on the boardwalk.

Fourth, accessibility involves not only ensuring that citizens with disabilities can access our parks, but also that once there, they can enjoy the same benefits that are provided to other visitors. This means that the educational and interpretive services provided, such as films, publications, lectures and wayside exhibits, can be used effectively by visitors who are blind or visually limited, and by those who are deaf or have hearing loss. This involves providing Braille and large print publications, audio-descriptions of our audio-visual programs, and tactile exhibits

for those with visual limitations and providing sign language interpretation and assistive listening systems for those with hearing limitations. Exact guidelines and standards on how to effectively meet the needs of the populations who experience a wide-range of visual and hearing loss are still in the process of being developed. Through the Harpers Ferry Center, the NPS is producing a variety of interpretive tools to make programs and media more accessible to visitors with disabilities such as closed captioning for audio-visual products shown in park visitor centers.

One recent project, the new exhibit at Kings Mountain National Military Park in South Carolina, was designed with the intent of providing access features for all populations in the most integrated way possible. Special attention was given to incorporate features for mobility, hearing impaired or visually impaired visitors in a seamless and unobtrusive manner. Audio elements are included at each exhibit to provide information for visitors who cannot read the text. These audio elements also offer audio-descriptions of the visual exhibits. In addition, all video components have unique flat screen monitors that provide captions for those who cannot hear the information. Tactile elements including touchable reproductions of the Revolutionary War Era “Ferguson Rifles” were produced to reveal the inner workings of the firing mechanism and to allow a hands-on experience for all visitors including those with limited vision. The integrated services do not require visitors to use or request special services or equipment. This project was a first of its kind endeavor, and we are planning to conduct evaluations of its effectiveness in delivering information to a broad and diverse population.

The NPS is working hard to identify and solve any additional barriers we face as we work towards the highest level of accessibility possible for all visitors to our parks. In the past, all superintendents were encouraged to work on making each park more accessible; however, there were no comprehensive, systemwide standards that had to be met. To correct this, we are incorporating access requirements into the comprehensive NPS Asset Management Program to ensure accessibility is addressed on a day-to-day basis, and not as a special or separate initiative.

By taking significant steps to incorporate the evaluation of accessibility needs into this comprehensive program, the NPS has a much more accurate picture of the current situation, including the costs of the repair and rehabilitation needs of the NPS, and will also serve to elevate access needs into the larger picture of asset management. In order to establish a baseline on the level of access in our parks, the NPS will be completing accessibility evaluations at a range of parks across different regions over the next 12 months. The results of this project combined with the evaluations already completed will give us information to better assess the degree of accessibility deficiencies that exist and better project the cost associated with correcting those deficiencies.

In order to create knowledge and awareness of the legal requirements for accessibility, including the regulations, guidelines and standards that must be followed, the NPS is implementing a program of technical assistance and continuing education. To this end, the NPS, through a cooperative partnership with Indiana University, has established the National Center on Accessibility (NCA). Through the NCA, we have been able to provide continuing education opportunities related to accessibility to over 1,850 NPS personnel from 240 different parks. In addition, the NCA has offered extensive technical assistance programs and services to the parks, and have sponsored research and demonstration programs to find more effective ways of

achieving access in outdoor recreation environments. The NCA also maintains an active website that receives over 400,000 hits per month. In addition to serving the NPS, these services are also made available to other park and recreation agencies at the local, State and Federal levels. We have recently extended this cooperative agreement for an additional 5 years through FY 2010, and through this cooperative partnership we will continue to provide training and technical assistance to the parks.

We are also studying and evaluating the impact of emerging technologies on the expansion of opportunities for people with disabilities in the NPS. For instance, over the past several months, a number of parks have received requests from individuals with disabilities to use the Segway Human Transporter, a two-wheeled, gyroscopically stabilized, battery powered personal transportation system, in the parks as their primary means of mobility. The NPS has been studying this situation and has been reviewing policies and practices of other Federal agencies regarding this issue. At the present time, we have not written a specific servicewide position on allowing Segways when used by individuals with disabilities as their mobility aide. Consistent with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, there are places where the use of Segways would be appropriate. Because of safety and resource management issues, it might not be appropriate in all parks and we are evaluating this. In order to better evaluate the long-term effect of this issue and to better assess the impacts on the diverse settings represented throughout the National Park System, the NPS has decided to temporarily allow and encourage each superintendent to establish park-specific interim policies and practices regarding the use of Segways by people with disabilities. After further study and evaluation of this issue at a number of parks, the NPS will make a decision with regard to the development of a servicewide policy.

Finally, the NPS has taken steps to better ensure that projects are in compliance with the appropriate standards when they are designed and constructed. Through the Denver Service Center (DSC), trained professionals work with parks and regional staff to review projects during the planning, design and construction stages to provide guidance and oversight on accessibility requirements. During FY 2004, the DSC worked on 153 projects that covered a total of over \$410 million in design and construction costs.

In conclusion, the NPS leadership is dedicated to providing the highest level of access that is practical, in conformance with the appropriate legal mandates and servicewide policies. We are continuing to encourage all of our park superintendents to identify barriers that limit full accessibility to our visitors, and to take actions to eliminate those barriers. Over the past several years, with the help of our staff, consultants, and partners, we have made a great deal of progress toward enhancing the quality of our accessibility program.

This concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you or other committee members might have.