



George Whitmore
<geowhit1954@comcast.net>

09/30/2009 10:46 PM

To yose_planning@nps.gov

cc George Whitmore <geowhit1954@comcast.net>

bcc

Subject Ahwahnee Rehabilitation scoping comments

Tehipite Chapter Yosemite Committee
Sierra Club

c/o:

George Whitmore

P.O. Box 5572

Fresno, CA 93755

geowhit1954@comcast.net

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30 September 2009

Superintendent

Yosemite National Park

ATTN: The Ahwahnee Comprehensive Rehabilitation Plan

P.O. Box 577

Yosemite, CA 95389

This is being emailed to yose_planning@nps.gov. Because of technical problems in the past, I am copying this to myself in an attempt to determine whether it appears to have transmitted properly.

If the e-mail attempt fails, this will be faxed to 209/379-1294.

Sir:

The following comments are submitted on behalf of the Tehipite Chapter of the Sierra Club. The Tehipite Chapter encompasses all of Yosemite National Park. Thank you for this opportunity to make suggestions. We trust that you will find our comments to be of use in your efforts to protect the visitor experience and the natural resources of Yosemite National Park, and that you will give our comments full consideration.

These are scoping comments for The Ahwahnee Comprehensive Rehabilitation Plan Environmental Assessment process.

INTRODUCTION

This project has not received the amount of notice to the public which projects usually receive when there is a NEPA process. I do not recall seeing it in the Planning Update. I did not see it in the Daily Report, although it is possible it appeared there during the period when many people were not receiving the DR. (In any event, I was told that one should not rely on the Daily Report

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for information on projects!) I did not see it in the E-Newsletter. I am normally at all Open Houses, but missed the one in August. I just happened to find a two or three line notice in the Fresno Bee, otherwise I would still be oblivious to the fact that this project is under a scoping period was open. Because of problems with the Park web site, I did not see it there; someone told me it was there, so I redoubled my efforts and finally found it.

We are asking that the above problems be acknowledged and addressed.

The characterization of the project as presented in the Fact Sheet leaves the public uncertain as to what they are supposed to be commenting on. It would have helped if there had been more examples of the type of work which is being considered. It is too late to address this problem in this scoping process, but it should be kept in mind for future projects.

RELATIONSHIP TO MERCED RIVER PLANNING

The Ahwahnee is apparently within the Merced Wild and Scenic River corridor. This leaves a question as to the relationship between this project and the Merced River planning process (MRP).

Some aspects of this project may involve user capacity issues which need to be addressed through the MRP process. Perhaps the most obvious one is parking (see below.)

Another example is that some people believe the Ahwahnee should be converted from a luxury hotel to more public purposes. For example, a Visitor Center, NPS and concessionaire offices, to be followed by the removal of other buildings in the Valley which would be made feasible by conversion of the Ahwahnee. This clearly would involve user capacity, so should the idea be presented at this time or wait and raise it during the MRP process? Should the Ahwahnee project be proceeding at this time, or should it be put on hold until the MRP process has become more clear?

(Note: These scoping comments were written prior to release of the Merced River Settlement Agreement (SA). We have not had an opportunity to study the SA closely enough to determine how it might impact the Ahwahnee project. In skimming back and forth through the SA, we can find no mention of the Ahwahnee project. However, under Part II, E, 4. (Page 16, Lines 10-13), it appears that the plaintiffs should have been given advance notice of the Ahwahnee project. Is this correct? If so, was the notice given? Has there been an agreement between the plaintiffs and the NPS re. the Ahwahnee project?)

RESTORATION OF HISTORIC VIEWS

A prime goal should be restoration of the historic views from the hotel. If you look in all directions from the hotel, you realize why it was situated where it is, and why the viewing windows were designed the way they are. But the views have been lost because of overgrowth of conifers---mostly pines. Instead of focusing on the surroundings, the hotel visitor now focuses on what is inside the hotel or in the immediate foreground. If the views were to be restored, more people just might be impressed with nature instead of fixating on drinks and dinner. The

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focus should be redirected to the views of Yosemite Valley. Go back to the original reason the hotel was located where it is. That means selective removal of trees.

There is concern that sometimes the desire to re-open vistas ends up creating new problems. Perhaps early photographs could be used for guidance. In any event, guidelines for tree removal need to be developed. In the absence of guidelines, it would probably be wise to use a conservative approach. We do urge that this issue be pursued, albeit cautiously.

PARKING

The open area east of the valet parking has been used as a dumping ground. Clean up of this area should be made a part of this project. Once it is cleaned up, it might be suitable for parking. Inadequate parking is a problem throughout Yosemite Valley, including the Ahwahnee. However, any decision as to parking probably should be deferred to the MRP process because it involves user capacity.

TENNIS COURTS

It is unclear which NPS plan calls for removal of the Ahwahnee tennis courts. If it is a plan which has been rescinded by the Merced River Settlement Agreement, then removal of the tennis courts would need to be addressed again. We urge that steps continue to be taken which will lead to eventual removal of the tennis courts.

ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES

What will be the source of funding for this project, and is there an estimate of total cost? There is some concern that time and energy, as well as money, being spent on the Ahwahnee should be directed toward campgrounds, other lower-cost accommodations, or other park necessities. If it can be demonstrated that there is no competition in the allocation of resources, then that particular concern perhaps would have been allayed.

CONCLUSION.

Thank you for seeking public scoping comments on this project. We trust that you will find our comments to be useful, and will give them full consideration.

Please send all future Yosemite planning documents to the Chair of the Sierra Club Tehipite Chapter Yosemite Committee. The address of the Chair, George Whitmore, is above.

George Whitmore, Chair
Tehipite Chapter Yosemite Committee
Sierra Club