



The Ahwahnee Fire and Life Safety Project

The Ahwahnee hotel was intended to exceed existing safety standards when it was built in the 1920s. Today the National Park Service (NPS) and DNC Parks and Resorts at Yosemite (DNC) are honoring this National Historic Landmark's tradition of safety through a new Fire and Life Safety Project, as well as a separate Comprehensive Rehabilitation Plan.

The Vision

Conceived by Stephen T. Mather, first Director of the National Park Service, as a grand hotel for Yosemite National Park, The Ahwahnee hotel was built with private funds between 1926 and 1927 by the park's primary concessioner, Yosemite Park & Curry Co., headed by Donald Tressider. As part of Mather's vigorous efforts to build public and political support for the parks, he believed the financial success of the national parks could be achieved by attracting affluent visitors. As many well-to-do travelers were

accustomed to a level of luxury not usually found in the existing national park accommodations, Mather and Tressider envisioned a grand hotel at Yosemite National Park. Like the other great lodges in national parks, this new hotel was intended to be a high quality hotel offering levels of luxury comparable to those in the finest city hotels. Since many of the early National Park wood-framed hotels and lodges had been lost to fire, this new hotel would be of fire-proof construction.

The Need

Built of concrete, steel, stone, Sierra timbers, and glass; The Ahwahnee was designed to exceed the best safety standards of the 1920s. In the more than 80 years since its construction building and accessibility codes have evolved. Facilities at The Ahwahnee are no longer fully compliant with the modern building and accessibility codes, including:

- California Historic Building Code
- International Building Code (IBC)
- National Fire Protection Association Code
- Federal Emergency Management Agency and

- IBC seismic requirements; and
- Americans with Disabilities Act standards.

To address these concerns, the National Park Service and DNC are undertaking both a Fire and Life Safety Project and a Comprehensive Rehabilitation Plan. The Fire and Life Safety Project calls for immediate action to address code requirements such as the installation of fire sprinklers throughout the facilities. Long term rehabilitation will be dealt with through The Ahwahnee Comprehensive Rehabilitation Plan.

The Project

The Fire and Life Safety Improvements Project for The Ahwahnee involves the installation of automatic fire sprinklers, fire/smoke detectors, and fire alarm systems throughout the National Historic Landmark building. The National Park Service is complying with the National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 project review process integrated with the National Environmental Policy Act analysis and documentation, in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer, to ensure the project will not negatively impact the historic fabric and character of The Ahwahnee.

the fire and life safety equipment will effect every room of the building and will involve varying amounts of disruption to the historic finishes. Once the installation is completed, all disrupted finishes will be restored with in-kind repairs and finishes.

As in all remodeling projects, the process will inevitably impact park visitors, hotel guests, and hotel operations. The National Park Service and DNC are working to sequence and schedule the work to minimize its impact. However, the project may still require a brief closure of the hotel during the early winter of 2011.

Photo: Kenny Karst, DNC Parks and Resorts at Yosemite

While the work is not expected to have a negative effect on the hotel, the installation of

The National Historic Landmark

To bring NPS Director Mather's vision to life, architect Gilbert Stanley Underwood was hired in 1926 to design the new luxury hotel. Underwood sought to create a structure that was both grand and in harmony with its surroundings. The result of his efforts typified a new rustic style of architecture distinct to the national parks—Parkitecture. The Ahwahnee's façade of local granite and concrete molded to look like redwood timber hides a steel frame that provided the structure a level of fire and earth quake resistance previously unknown in Yosemite Valley.

Art historians Dr. Phyllis Ackerman and Arthur Upham Pope were engaged to design a comfortable, yet grand, interior for The Ahwahnee. The designers' selection of geometric

patterns loosely based upon American Indian designs incorporated both Art Deco and Persian influences and capitalized on the post World War I national fascination with the American West.

In 1987 The Ahwahnee's significance to architecture, art, and the National Park Service was formally recognized through designation as a National Historic Landmark. Its distinct rustic architecture combined with the interior artwork and its association with important 20th century figures such as Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Shah of Iran, Eleanore Roosevelt, Walt Disney, John F. Kennedy, Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Phillip solidify The Ahwahnee's status as a national treasure.

The Living Museum

"...on entering The Ahwahnee one is conscious of calm and complete beauty echoing the mood of majesty and peace that is the essential quality of Yosemite..." Ansel Adams

The Ahwahnee is a treasured icon of Yosemite National Park whose historic fixtures and environs are available for all park visitors to enjoy. Free tours of The Ahwahnee are available throughout the year. Visitors can explore the history, architecture, and artwork of The Ahwahnee with a knowledgeable guide.

The Ahwahnee offers visitors the chance to experience the early history of the National Park Service, when national parks were struggling to establish themselves as an essential part of the American landscape. Whether a visit lasts a week or just for the afternoon, all are welcome to walk the lobby, sit in the Great Lounge, and enjoy the historic furnishings and art work. To find out more about The Ahwahnee, enjoy a historic tour, available throughout the year.

The Follow Up

The National Park Service cares for The Ahwahnee and Yosemite National Park on behalf of their true owners, the American people. Public interest and participation in park plans and projects are always welcome.

To find out more about either The Ahwahnee Fire and Life Safety Project or The Ahwahnee Comprehensive Rehabilitation Plan:

- Visit the park's planning website at www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/planning.htm
- Email yose_planning@nps.gov
- Write to Superintendent
Attn: The Ahwahnee Fire and Life Safety Project
P.O. Box 577
Yosemite, CA 95389
- Fax 209-379-1294

- Attend a Public Open House on the last Wednesday of the month from 1 to 4 p.m. in the Auditorium in Yosemite Valley.