

The Ahwahnee Comprehensive Rehabilitation Plan Environmental Assessment

Public Scoping Concerns Report



**National Park Service
Yosemite National Park
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Introduction

This report summarizes public scoping comments submitted on the proposed The Ahwahnee Comprehensive Rehabilitation Plan Environmental Assessment (EA). Public scoping comments will be used to assist the park in developing a range of reasonable and feasible project alternatives that meet the purpose and need, including a no action alternative, and then analyzing the environmental effects of each alternative. A 45-day public scoping period for this EA extended from August 13, 2009 through September 26, 2009 and was subsequently extended through September 30 to accept comments that may have been submitted at the Yosemite National Park Public Open House held in September. Two public meetings were held: a Park Public Open House at the East Auditorium in Yosemite Valley on August 26, 2009, and a public scoping meeting at The Ahwahnee on September 22, 2009. In addition, information about the project was also displayed and public comments were accepted at an informal public meeting at The Ahwahnee on September 8, 2009 and at the Park Public Open House on September 30 at the East Auditorium in Yosemite Valley. The purpose of these meetings was to inform interested parties about the proposed project and solicit comments from members of the public in order to understand the spectrum of concerns, interests, and issues that should be considered in the planning process.

Comments were invited for submission by mail, fax, email, through the Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) system, and on comment forms that were made available during public scoping meetings. During the scoping period, eight comment letters were received, generating 21 individual comments. This report provides a summary of concerns expressed in these letters.

Project Background

The Ahwahnee is located in Yosemite Valley in Yosemite National Park, California. The Ahwahnee area includes a National Historic Landmark hotel, as well as guest cottages, an employee dormitory, and associated grounds and landscaping. Built in 1927, The Ahwahnee is an iconic landmark and is used year-round by both overnight and day visitors to Yosemite Valley.

The purpose of this project is to develop a comprehensive plan for phased, long-term rehabilitation of The Ahwahnee National Historic Landmark hotel and associated guest cottages, employee dormitory, and landscaped grounds in order to:

- Restore, preserve, and protect the historic integrity and character-defining features of The Ahwahnee by rehabilitating aged or altered historic finishes and contributing landscape features.
- Enhance visitor and employee safety by bringing the buildings and grounds into compliance with current building, fire, life-safety, and seismic standards.
- Improve hotel energy efficiency and operations and support National Park Service sustainability goals by repairing or replacing outdated or inefficient building systems and components.
- Protect and enhance the visitor experience at The Ahwahnee through improved operational efficiency, increased accessibility, and rehabilitation of historic resources.

Project Purpose and Need

Need for the Plan

After more than 80 years in service, the hotel and associated structures need rehabilitation because:

- Facilities are not fully compliant with the most recent building and accessibility codes:
 - California Historic Building Code
 - International Existing Building Code (IEBC)
 - National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards
 - Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and IBC seismic requirements; and
 - Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards.
- Many electrical, plumbing, and mechanical systems serving The Ahwahnee facilities are aging and inefficient.
- Some historic finishes and landscape components are time-worn or have been altered.
- Current operational layout reduces the efficiency of providing a high level of visitor services.

Purpose of the Plan

Develop a comprehensive plan for phased, long-term rehabilitation of The Ahwahnee in order to:

- Restore, preserve, and protect the historic integrity of the National Historic Landmark hotel and other historic structures.
- Preserve and protect the historic contributing and character-defining features of The Ahwahnee cultural landscape.
- Enhance visitor and employee safety.
- Improve hotel energy efficiency, operations, and service functions.
- Protect and enhance the visitor experience at The Ahwahnee.

Public Scoping Comment Review

Public scoping letters received during the scoping period are reviewed and analyzed in a series of steps. For example, each letter received is first read to determine the discrete points expressed by the author, each of which is considered to be a “comment.” Each discrete comment is then “coded” in order to associate that comment with a particular resource topic or element of the plan (such as cultural resources or the plan’s relationship to other projects).

Once all letters have been coded for individual comments, similar comments are grouped together and a “concern statement” is generated, which is intended to capture the main points expressed by the comments. The National Park Service planning team then screens each concern statement to determine if it is within the scope of the project.

The purpose of the screening process is to identify what types of concerns were raised, whether a concern is within or outside of a project’s proposed scope of work, and how the planning team should address comments in the environmental assessment. An “In Scope” screening code was

assigned to those concerns that will likely be considered in the development of alternatives to be evaluated in the environmental assessment. An “Out of Scope” screening code was assigned to those concerns that were determined to be beyond the purpose and need, or “scope” of this project.

Results of Public Scoping

During the 45-day public scoping period, the park received eight letters from seven individuals and one organization. The analysis of these letters identified 21 discrete comments, from which 18 general concern statements were generated. Some of the main public scoping concerns submitted to the National Park Service to consider during planning for this project include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Maintain the historic integrity of the hotel
- Remove the tennis courts
- Use native vegetation for restoration
- Remove trees to restore the scenic views and vistas
- Address parking issues at The Ahwahnee
- Address the relationship of this project to the Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan planning process

All comments received during the scoping period have been duly considered and are now part of the administrative record for this project. The public scoping letters can be viewed on the park’s web site at <http://www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt>.

How To Use This Document

This Public Scoping Report is divided into two sections. The section titled “In Scope” provides a list of scoping concerns, by topic that will likely be addressed in the project alternatives within the environmental assessment. The second section, titled “Out of Scope,” lists all scoping concerns that were determined to be beyond the stated purpose and need, or “scope,” of this project.

Concerns presented under each topic include “supporting quotes,” which are verbatim excerpts from individual public scoping letters. These supporting quotes are followed by comment author attributes, such as whether the comment author was an individual or an organization (if an organization – a general description of the organization type), the city and state of residence of the comment author, and the assigned letter and comment number. For example, “(Individual, Merced, #1-1)” is a letter from an individual– which was the first letter received, and the first coded comment from that specific letter.

Each concern and associated supporting comments are followed by a response that addresses how the National Park Service will address that particular issue in the planning process. For all topics, any actions resulting in changes to existing conditions would be presented as elements of the alternatives. The effects of these actions would be evaluated in the environmental consequences section of the planning document.

In Scope Concerns

As part of the project's planning process, the National Park Service will examine a range of actions to address the project's purpose and need. The environmental assessment will analyze a set of reasonable alternatives that address repairs and upgrades to the hotel facilities, while protecting and preserving the historic character and use of the buildings and contributing elements of the surrounding cultural landscape, and minimizing natural resource impacts. All actions relating to The Ahwahnee rehabilitation will be evaluated in the environmental consequences section of the environmental assessment.

The National Park Service has screened public concerns raised during the public scoping period for The Ahwahnee Comprehensive Rehabilitation Plan EA. Based on this screening, the National Park Service finds the following public concerns, grouped by topic, to be within the scope of the rehabilitation project, and will consider these concerns in the development of a reasonable range of alternatives for rehabilitation of The Ahwahnee. Project implementation is contingent on the signing of a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) by the National Park Service's Director of the Pacific West Region, and allocation of construction funding.

Planning Process and Policy

Concern 1: The National Park Service should avoid renovations that are intended only to increase bookings at The Ahwahnee.

"Please don't make this a plastic renovation to gain bookings."
(Individual, #2-1)

Concern 2: The National Park Service should approach this rehabilitation effort as historic preservation.

"Please treat it like the historic preservation it deserves to be."
(Individual, #2-2)

Concern 3: The National Park Service should avoid providing new room amenities at The Ahwahnee to protect the traditional visitor experience.

"Many wonderful old hotels have lost their charm due to air conditioning, removal of transoms for the sake of sound abatement, and inclusion of "guest conveniences". It's nice to plug one's hair dryer into a bathroom outlet. However, if the original rooms didn't have saunas and spa tubs, don't install them now."
(Individual, #2-3)

Concern 4: The National Park Service should clarify the relationship between this project and the Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan planning process.

"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)."
(Tehipite Chapter Yosemite Committee Sierra Club, #6-3)

Concern 5: The National Park Service should put this project on hold until the Merced Wild and Scenic River Management Plan is completed.

“Should The Ahwahnee project be proceeding at this time, or should it be put on hold until the MRP process has become more clear?”

(Tehipite Chapter Yosemite Committee Sierra Club, #6-4)

Concern 6: The National Park Service should document whether advance notice of The Ahwahnee project was given to the plaintiffs as required in the Merced River Settlement Agreement (MRSA).

“In skimming back and forth through the Merced River Settlement Agreement, we can find no mention of The Ahwahnee project. However, under part II. E. 4., 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?”

(Tehipite Chapter Yosemite Committee Sierra Club, #6-5)

Concern 7: The National Park Service should defer any changes that involve user capacity (e.g., parking) to the Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan planning process.

“Inadequate parking is a problem throughout Yosemite Valley, including The Ahwahnee....Any decision as to parking probably should be deferred to the MRP process because it involves user capacity.”

(Tehipite Chapter Yosemite Committee Sierra Club, #6-8)

Concern 8: The National Park Service should identify the funding source and the total cost for the project.

“What will be the source of funding for this project, and is there an estimate of total cost?”

(Tehipite Chapter Yosemite Committee Sierra Club, #6-10)

Concern 9: The National Park Service should demonstrate that there is no competition for the money spent on this project from lower-cost accommodations in the park.

“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 will have been allayed.”

(Tehipite Chapter Yosemite Committee Sierra Club, #6-11)

Concern 10: The National Park Service should acknowledge and address a problem with the amount of public notification for this plan.

“This project has not received the amount of notice to the public which projects usually receive when there is a NEPA process... We are asking that the above problems be acknowledged and addressed.”

(Tehipite Chapter Yosemite Committee Sierra Club, #6-1)

Concern 11: The National Park Service should clarify the type of work being proposed in the fact sheet.

“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.”

(Tehipite Chapter Yosemite Committee Sierra Club, #6-2)

Park Resources

Concern 12: The National Park Service should not change the critical aspects (the park, the wilderness, the wildlife, the air) of the visitor experience at The Ahwahnee.

“All of the above critical aspects (the park, the wilderness, the wildlife, the air) should remain unchanged.”

(Individual, #2-4)

Vegetation

Concern 13: The National Park Service should only use native plant species for landscape restoration at The Ahwahnee.

“Refurbish surrounding Ahwahnee landscape with native plant species only.”

(Individual, #8-3)

Concern 14: The National Park Service should develop guidelines for tree removal to restore the historic vistas from the hotel.

“A prime goal should be the 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 the over growth of conifers – mostly pines...The focus should be redirected to the views of the Yosemite Valley. Go back to the original reason the hotel was located where it is. This means selective removal of trees...There is concern that sometimes the desire to re-open vistas ends up creating new problems...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.”

(Tehipite Chapter Yosemite Committee Sierra Club, #6-6)

Cultural Resources

Concern 15: The National Park Service should clean up the area east of the valet parking as part of this project.

“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.”

(Tehipite Chapter Yosemite Committee Sierra Club, #6-7)

Recreation

Concern 16: The National Park Service should remove the tennis courts from the grounds of The Ahwahnee.

“We urge that steps continue to be taken which will lead to eventual removal of the tennis courts.”

(Tehipite Chapter Yosemite Committee Sierra Club, #6-9)

“Continue with the abandonment and removal of the tennis courts.”

(Individual, #7-1)

“Remove tennis courts formerly used by Ahwahnee guests.”

(Individual, #8-1)

Concern 17: The National Park Service should not revive non-ecocentric activities that are not appropriate in national parks (i.e. golf).

“Other non-ecocentric activities i.e. golf are not appropriate in a national park. Do not revive.”

(Individual, #8-2)

Out of Scope Concerns

Four letters without substantive comments were submitted for consideration. These letters contain comments that did not provide enough information to be put in context, or were simply anecdotes about experiences related to The Ahwahnee. These letters will remain as part of the Administrative Record for this project.