

PROPOSAL – BETTER VISITOR SERVICES INITIATIVE (BVSI)

The National Park Hospitality Association believes that a unique opportunity exists to *improve services to visitors, increase the quality and sustainability of NPS programs and activities and create a framework for supporting outstanding and memorable park experiences over the next century.* We ask to join the National Park Service in a careful review of operation through a **Better Visitor Services Initiative (BVSI)** between now and August 2011, to develop ideas for the NPS five-year centennial action plan. Some of the issues that this initiative might address are:

A) *Improve Visitor Infrastructure to Attract More Visitors.* Park visitor infrastructure must support relevant experiences for 21st century Americans, and must support an increase of visitation parallel to the overall growth of the US population. NPS visitor capacity improvements must come at today's best known and most visited units but should also expand infrastructure in other units with potential and suitability for visitation growth because of location or features. Improvements might involve new overnight accommodations, new food service facilities, improved transportation and more. In all cases, the new visitor infrastructure should meet best practices, including LEED certification, and should result in iconic features and operations which, like the Ahwahnee, the El Tovar and other key visitor structures, continue to provide park-appropriate structures a century or more after construction.

B) *Revitalize NPS Campgrounds.* NPS campgrounds are significantly underutilized, and use has declined markedly. The decline has contributed to reduced time in national parks – and eroded the closeness to parks that comes from overnight stays in park campgrounds. The deferred maintenance backlog for NPS campgrounds is large, and most NPS campgrounds fail to reflect 21st century changes in family patterns and camping styles. Even with little or no growth in the number of NPS campsites, extended camping seasons and increased occupancy rates can be readily achieved, funded by shifting many park campgrounds to concessioner operations. The change would allow transfer of NPS staff to other, higher value roles and, by capitalizing on concessioner marketing capabilities, would generate new franchise fee revenues and would expand visitor choices without incurring federal capital costs.

C) *Encourage Concessioner Investment in the Parks.* Nearly all concessions contracts under the 1998 NP Concessions Improvement Act have been for 10 years, despite authority for longer contracts:

"... the Secretary may award a contract for a term of up to 20 years if the Secretary determines that the contract terms and conditions ...warrant a longer term."

NPS should reduce the deferred maintenance backlog and reduce the need for taxpayer-funded capital investments by encouraging concessioner investments through longer contract terms. Longer contracts will also save valuable NPS and concessioner resources now allocated to prospectus development, bid preparation and contract start-ups. BVSI can also explore historic property tax credits for concessioner investments in structures where NPS will ultimately receive full value of those investments, and use of a new "superior/satisfactory/unsatisfactory" rating system allowing concessioners to earn a five-year contract extension by achieving "superior" ratings during the first half of a contract – an effort that can reduce NPS costs of prospectus development, evaluation of offers and new contract implementation.

D) *Rethink Park Fees.* Entrance and other fees by the NPS should be studied carefully to develop a fee program which yields revenues to aid park operations and better supports overall the park mission. Options of a waiver of fees for those demonstrating economic need, increasing the senior age level, modification of the seven-day entrance fee provision, increased use of technology parallel to toll collection on highways, expansion of annual pass ownership, encouragement of volunteerism at non-fee parks to earn entrance passes, promotion of annual and international visitor passes and more should be considered. Installation and operation of automated fee collection systems can help make fee collection efficient and convenient to visitors.

E) *Outreach Efforts to Boost Visitation.* America's national parks are loved, but a declining percentage of Americans enjoy parks today than at any time in the past 25 years. Park experiences deliver great benefits – including better mental and physical health, education about our nation's history and the environment, regional economic benefits and more. Therefore, outreach and marketing efforts to encourage visitations should expand beyond current efforts, including concessioner advertising, fee-free periods and NPS communications. Expanding park visitor demographics are important – especially targeting youth, urban, economically disadvantaged, minority and family components of our population. The new National Parks Promotion Council can help unite all park interests in research and action.

The BVSI could be assigned: to the Assistant Director, Business Services; to a joint NPHA/NPS task force; to the National Park System Advisory Board; to the National Park Concessions Management Advisory Board; or pursued under an agreement with the Center for Park Management.