



December 2012 Newsletter

National Park Hospitality Association

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NPHA ANNUAL MEETING PLANS

All NPHA members and allies are invited to participate in the 2013 NPHA annual meeting – “Action on Grand Thoughts.” The meeting will be in Washington, beginning on March 17, and most sessions will be at the Hamilton Crowne Plaza Hotel. There will be sessions on Capitol Hill and at the U.S. Department of the Interior. Topics will include: (1) Encouraging and rewarding concessioner excellence; (2) Concessioners and Incident Command Teams – learning from 2012; (3) Defining appropriate 21st Century visitor services in national parks and the role of concessioners – and issues with the 1998 act; (4) The NPS Centennial Campaign; (5) Cell and WiFi access enhancement efforts; and (6) Developing a National Parks Economic Activity Dashboard. The NPS Concessions Management Advisory Board will hold its meeting the next day (March 20), and NPHA members are urged to participate.

Room reservations must be made by February 19 to get the special meeting rate, and registrations before March 8 will receive a \$50 “Early Bird” reduction. To download registration materials, go to <http://parkpartners.org/March-Meeting-2013.html>.

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NPS/NPHA EFFORTS TO ENHANCE CELL AND WIFI SERVICE IN PARKS

Verizon and a team involving ViaSat brought temporary top-notch internet and cellular telephone service to Grand Canyon National Park’s North Rim for NPHA’s Grand Thoughts at the Grand Canyon. The infrastructure was nearly invisible and the

resulting capabilities were widely praised – and prompted NPS Deputy Director Peggy O'Dell to propose a pilot effort in five parks as a team. NPHA members submitted a list of 11 parks to NPS along with a project overview which included the following goals:

- 1) Provide a basic level of non-fee internet access at all major, developed visitor areas in the national park system.
- 2) Provide basic cell phone service at all major visitor areas in national park units, as well as along most roads and at major sites such as trailheads.
- 3) Deliver timely, park-focused information within national parks through smart phones, tablets and computers.
- 4) Give individual parks discretion on where cell phone service is available, and whether the service provides full or emergency-only service.
- 5) Identify and employ best available and practical technologies that minimize visual impacts of cell and internet access systems.
- 6) Create special gateway zones at park entry points using downloadable data to replace both low-power radio systems and printed material hand-outs.
- 7) Design a system that is financially sustainable, generating revenues adequate to install, maintain and upgrade internet access. To do this, concessioners are offered the opportunity to develop and operate these systems, either individually or through a collaborative venture with other concessioners.
- 8) Offer additional bandwidth where possible to park visitors on a fee basis.
- 9) Coordinate efforts of the NPS, concessioners and friends organizations to create official park apps which can be readily downloaded to all major mobile channels, and which work to aid park visits, even when not connected to the internet, through GPS and other technologies.

Deputy Director O'Dell delivered the recommendations to the NPS Regional Directors and assigned John Wessels (NPS Intermountain Regional Director) and Sue Waldron (NPS Assistant Director for Communications and lead for the NPS "Go Digital" component of A Call to Action) to work with NPHA. The list is now being reviewed by the regional and park teams and final selections of five (maybe more!) sites will occur early in January. A strategy session in February involving NPS, NPHA and communications firms is likely.

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CONCESSIONERS AND INCIDENT COMMAND TEAMS – LESSONS LEARNED

At least three significant incidents occurred in 2012 which interrupted concessioner services – and highlighted challenges in NPS/concessioner cooperation: fires in Lassen National Park, the hantavirus outbreak in Yosemite, and Hurricane Sandy, impacting a number of park units including Liberty and Ellis Islands. Sandy has had a major, and continuing, impact on NPHA members. Nearly 400 workers have been laid off – indefinitely, since that is also the only public or private timetable being offered by NPS on when the public will again be allowed onto those islands. The interruption of business is severely impacting these concessioners, but is also having a major negative impact on tourism in the New York City area. The Statue of Liberty is one of the

region's iconic and most visited destinations. Visitors spend more than \$80 million annually reaching and while on the islands, and this spending supports hundreds of jobs and franchise payments of some \$16 million annually to the National Park Service.

NPHA has urged the NPS to actively involve the concessions industry in dealing with such incidents, in preparatory efforts, in damage assessments and in recovery operations – and especially in helping to convey to the public important information about risks and operational restrictions. NPS Associate Director Lena McDowall has listened and indicated that she intends to use the Lassen, Yosemite and Statue of Liberty experiences as catalysts for a change in how NPS Incident Command Teams operate. She has also begun an examination of strategies to allow concessioners to overcome the economic challenges of park-closing events and fulfill NPS' obligation to allow concessioners to make a reasonable profit under concessions agreements. This will be a topic of discussions at the NPHA March Meeting.

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GUEST DONATION PROGRAM AND CONCESSIONER REVENUES, 2006-12

NPHA, the National Park Foundation (NPF) and the NPS Partnership Office are reviewing operation of the Guest Donation Program, last reviewed a decade ago. NPHA has worked with NPF to document the funds collected under this program since 2006, including both funds deposited with NPF and then dispersed to individual parks and funds which go directly to local park "friends" groups. Funds collected in 11 park units for FY12 exceeded \$800,000, and total funds collected for FY06 to FY12 in 19 parks are more than \$3.1 million.

NPHA, NPF and NPS agree that this important program can and should continue and expand. NPHA has identified several challenges now being reviewed by the three organizations, including:

- 1) Little information about the benefits from the donations is available to the public or concessioners. Guests are required to be offered the chance to "opt out," and when they ask concessions employees about how past contributions, or the contributions they are making, are being used, there is little information available. There is no in-park signage that notes projects funded totally or in part by Guest Donations. There is no website to explain the program, highlight its contributions to national parks or provide more information about the role of philanthropy in the national park system.
- 2) The status of concessioners as "prohibited sources" for direct project support under Directors Order 21 has a significant chilling impact on concessioner involvement, since they cannot be associated with the projects receiving guest contributions.
- 3) The program needs to move beyond the small percentage of total park visitors who are overnight guests at concessioner operations (approximately 7 million annually) to day visitors and visitors to park gateway communities.
- 4) Once a visitor has made a contribution under the program, they can and

should be thanked and invited to connect with parks in a more robust fashion, both as a volunteer and philanthropically. A well thought out acknowledgment process could be especially important both for local friends organizations and for the 2016 Centennial effort.

5) Proposals to solicit a national sponsor offering to match guest contributions have run into major concerns over conflicts with provisions of Directors Order 21.

Another key discussion underway between NPHA and NPS involves tracking concessioner sales and franchise payments to the NPS. NPS now collects this information annually, but the data are not current. FY11 data – which show that concessioners had sales of \$1.14 billion and paid franchise fees of some \$70 million – have just been released. The volume of sales is virtually unchanged since FY06. Franchise fees, however, have climbed 20.1%.

NPHA and NPS are now exploring ways to combine data from concessioners, the NPS and key gateways into a quarterly National Parks Economic Activity Dashboard which would help monitor trends and provide indications of future visitor activity.

Both the Guest Donation Program and reporting of park visitor economic activity will be topics discussed at the March NPHA annual meeting.

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Advance Notices

1) NPS is expected to issue its new healthy food standard early in 2013, and NPHA is planning additional healthy food seminars and shows.

2) The NPHA Board has created a task force to examine how well the goals of the 1998 concessions law have been met – and whether the law provides NPS and concessioners the tools to meet the needs of visitor services in national parks in the 21st Century.

3) The Made in America movement continues to press for action by the Congress – newest activity involves US Senator Bernard Sanders (I-VT). The NPHA Retail Operations Committee will be conducting an inventory of retail offerings and working on plans to better connect concessioners with qualifying vendors.

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