

To: Central Wasatch Commission Board

From: Tom Diegel, Co-Chair, CWC Stakeholder's Council

Re: Mill Creek Canyon Shuttle Feasibility Study Update Funding

Hello Commissioners,

I am writing to encourage the Central Wasatch Commission to strongly consider CWC staff's request for funds to cover the cost of updating the Millcreek Canyon Shuttle Feasibility study contracted by SLCo that took a close look at Mill Creek Canyon (MCC) transit and identified - and solved - many of the issues associated with shuttle implementation. The original study by Fehr and Peers was completed in 2012 and needs an update in order for the Forest Service and Salt Lake County to consider initiating efforts towards getting a shuttle in Mill Creek Canyon.

Probably the most important aspect of the canyon that needs to be quantified but is quite clear without empirical data is that Mill Creek Canyon is even more popular/crowded now than it was in 2012, and this increased use has expanded seasonally. In all four seasons it is common for people to drive their cars up the canyon and literally every parking spot in the canyon is taken (including those illegal "spots" that the upper canyon FLAP-funded project is going to attempt to alleviate) and they turn around and drive back down. The need for a viable shuttle option in Mill Creek Canyon has gotten even more acute as the valley population swells and interest in convenient, high-quality recreation has soared.

A brief history:

- 30 years ago, County Councilman Jim Bradley spearheaded an effort to create a toll for Mill Creek Canyon, which was successfully implemented. A toll booth was erected near the mouth, and fees collected went to management and upkeep of the canyon.
- in 2011 Fehr and Peers (a local consulting company) was contracted to do a comprehensive study of MCC and identify potential improvements.
- The Fehr and Peers report was issued in 2012 and addressed many salient needs for the canyon, including updated pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure (safety) and infrastructure necessary for accommodating a pilot shuttle system.
- The recommended shuttle system was for contracted 10-15 passenger vans with the capability to carry bikes and dogs.
- The pilot project was targeted for one month in the summer and one of the weekend days, with no auto access above the winter gate on shuttle days except for canyon homeowners
- Salt Lake County did not take any action on MCC, until....

- In 2019 SLCo did a comprehensive study of *all* potential upgrades to the canyon in anticipation of filing for a Federal Lands Access Program (FLAP) grant.
- In conjunction with the USFS Salt Lake Ranger District (SLRD) it was determined that the FLAP funds would go with the Federal Highways Agency (FHWA) to widen and straighten the upper canyon road.
- An Environmental Assessment was conducted, with several public comment periods.
- The majority of the public comments in each round of the project's design phases decried the project's plan for dramatic lane widening, and the 2nd most-common comment was to add a shuttle system.
- Part of the original impetus for the upper canyon road widening (and parking enhancement) project was to accommodate shuttle "buses" (vans).
- In spring 2023 the SLRD issued a briefing paper requesting that "external project proponent(s)" could - under their guidelines - submit a proposal to initiate the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process for a shuttle system.
- In that document the SLRD recited several passages from the 2003 Forest Plan:

The Forest Service support of a shuttle service in Mill Creek Canyon is based on and is consistent with the Guidelines and Desired Future Conditions for Mill Creek Canyon in the 2003 Revised Wasatch-Cache Forest Plan.

- *The Forest Service will cooperate with public and private entities to encourage the use of mass transit to access recreational facilities and programs adjacent to roadways.*
- *The Forest Service will actively work with other parties to explore options for reducing private vehicular use within the Canyon.*
- *Visitors to the Tri-Canyon area, including Mill Creek Canyon, will make increasing use of mass transit to reduce congestion on the highways, and mass transit opportunities will expand to include year-round operations.*
- CWC staff spent considerable time and resources creating a document that addressed the concerns the SLRD had with the program.
- The FS rejected the proposal due to a lack of identification of specific funding and their perception that the parking plan was insufficient.
- The CWC Stakeholder Council's Mill Creek Canyon Committee worked with UDOT, Skyline High School, Granite School District, and Millcreek City to identify more than enough parking near the mouth of the canyon (3800 S/Wasatch Boulevard).
- Much of the potential intense use of the canyon will happen during the summer and on weekends when school is not in session.
- UDOT is willing to discuss modifying the small/little-used park to the east of the freeway.

- The FS essentially ignores this, and SLCo has been no help.
- There is also no acknowledgement that state and federal funds may be available to fund the shuttle.
- The process to create a second major phase of road improvement may start soon.

The need for a shuttle in Mill Creek Canyon is acute, and a system has been identified and designed for over a dozen years. It's clear that the resource-strapped FS is not willing to commit the resources towards enabling a shuttle, despite the desire of valley residents. However, with an update to the Fehr and Peers study both SLCo and the FS will take notice and perhaps it can be included in the next phase of the FLAP grant and/or the state can fund the program. However, to update the report will cost ~\$34,000. I understand that for the CWC contingency fund this is a significant number, but to take this important step towards a long-overdue system when the CWC has already put in the bulk of the time and resources this is a small amount. Delaying funding for most of a year will only prolong the acute need for the shuttle, and to deny that to the many valley residents who love Mill Creek Canyon and want the best for their beloved canyon would be a crushing disappointment.

We have all been working together for over a decade to improve the Wasatch and few on-the-ground actions have actually been realized. Delaying/denying this penultimate step over a relatively small amount based on administrative budget workings would be a shame and send a poor message to the stakeholders and the citizens who are relying on us to improve accessibility to the Wasatch. Working together with Mill Creek City, UDOT, the FS, and SLCo to enable a shuttle for Mill Creek Canyon would be a legacy that the Commission would and should be proud of.

Tom Diegel