

Major Problems with UDOT's LCC Gondola System

In order for UDOT to receive final approval for its Gondola project, it must show that the data in its Environmental Impact Study is “thorough, accurate and complete”. However, there is a seemingly innocuous, but definitely inaccurate statement in the middle of the study that turns out to be the key to understanding why the Gondola system will not work.

The EIS specifically states that it will only take **12 minutes** from the time any individual enters the base station garage to park, gear up and actually get on the Gondola. This is inaccurate, misleading and technically impossible.

System Design

The base station garage will have 2,500 stalls. UDOT estimates an average of about 2 people per vehicle, so maximum garage capacity is about 5,000 people. Each Gondola car will carry 35 people. The cars will be 2 minutes apart. It's about 9 miles up the canyon, and the maximum speed of the Gondola is 18 mph. The system can carry 1,050 people per hour.

UDOT experts spent four years specifically designing the system to accommodate the unique features of Little Cottonwood Canyon. It cannot be readily modified.

The system is designed to accommodate thousands of people a day and won't be successful unless it does so. If those high volumes are not reached on a regular basis, it will be hard to justify the need for the system, and the economic and environmental cost of the system.

Time Related Criteria

Because the system requires very high numbers of users, two time-related criteria become critical to the success of the system. The first is the total time it will take to move a certain number of skiers up and down the canyon. The second is the inevitable queuing problem.

Total Time

The Gondola can only evacuate 1,050 people per hour from the garage. If 2,500 vehicles/5,000 people enter the garage on any given day, it will take 5 hours to evacuate all of them. If the Gondola starts running at 7:00 AM the last of the 5,000 skiers will not be boarding the Gondola until 12 noon. And then it's another 5 hours to get all of those people back to the base at the end of the day.

The Queuing Problem

Any system that has demand spikes and technical bottlenecks will have a queuing problem. This is an inevitable problem for all ski areas. Skiers tend to want to be on the slopes in the same time frames every day, and the Gondola's bottleneck is its 1,050 person per hour evacuation limit.

The Gondola's queuing problem is both unavoidable and unpredictable. The problem does not have any relationship to the time of day that a person enters the garage -- it is

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completely related to how many people are ahead of you when you actually enter the queue.

AM Queuing

The Snowbird and Alta lifts start running at about 9:00. The Gondola ride takes 30-40 minutes. UDOT wants you to think that every Gondola-rider that wants to get on the early lifts at the resorts and experience a full day of skiing could just be in the garage by about 8:00 because their official documents clearly state that whatever time you enter the garage, you can be on the Gondola in 12 minutes. In the garage by 8:00, on the Gondola 8:12, at the resorts before 9:00.

UDOT's 12-minute guarantee is far from the truth.

The Gondola is scheduled to start running at about 7:00 AM. On any given day, whenever you enter the garage, there could be 350 or 3,000 people standing in line ahead of you.

If you are the 350th person in line when you join the queue, it's your lucky day, because at 35 people per car and cars 2 minutes apart, you will be getting on the 10th car in line in about 20 minutes and will reach the top of the canyon at about 30-40 minutes later.

However, on a busy day, no matter what time you enter the garage, say 8:00, you could be the 3,000th person in line. The system can only evacuate 1,050 people per hour, so it will take 3 hours to get down to you. You won't be boarding the Gondola until 11:00, and then it's still the 30-40 minute ride up the canyon.

Conditions in the Garage

While waiting in the queue, you will be standing on a cement floor, in a multi-level garage with escalators, with potentially thousands of other skiers with all their gear and children in tow, for variable lengths of time ranging from a few minutes to a few hours. This will not be a pleasant experience for most people.

Your time in the queue combined with the garage environment will definitely set the tone for that day's skiing experience.

PM Queuing

Unfortunately, the queuing problem will recur later in the day. After skiing all day, everyone will be trapped at the top of the canyon with the Gondola as their only means of escape. On any given day, there could be up to 5,000 people in this situation. The system is being built to accommodate thousands of people a day and won't be successful unless it does so.

Unlike the situation in the morning when skiers are protected from the elements in the garage, the people in the PM queue will be standing unprotected on the slopes since UDOT does not seem to envision any protected areas that would shelter thousands of people.

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Everyone will be jockeying to secure a good position in the Gondola queue because their position in line will determine whether they get home at a reasonable hour, or long after dark. Winter sunset in LCC is about 5:00.

The Gondola can only evacuate 1,050 people per hour. If there are 5,000 people in this situation on any given day and most of them decide to leave the slopes at around 3:00, the last of the 5,000 won't be boarding the Gondola until about 8:00 and won't be down to the base until 8:40.

Every time a person chooses to use the Gondola, both their AM and PM queuing times will be different -- getting a good position in the queue will be a gamble every time.

The Reality of the Ride

Snowbird's tram ride is about 7 minutes long. The Gondola ride up to Alta will be about 40 minutes long -- about 6 times longer than the tram.

Imagine getting on Snowbird's tram and riding it up-down-up-down-up-down without getting off -- and you'll need to do that twice a day.

Related Problems

Since the Gondola is expected to significantly increase the number of skiers at each resort, the length of every lift line and every cafeteria line can also be expected to increase.

Truth, Transparency & Accountability

UDOT's contention that everyone's transit time in the garage will only be 12 minutes is obviously not true. There must be some way to hold the proponents of the Gondola accountable for this major error -- hopefully before the system is built and the public becomes painfully aware of the reality.

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