

**MINUTES OF THE CENTRAL WASATCH COMMISSION (“CWC”) BUDGET FINANCE/AUDIT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ELECTRONICALLY ON WEDNESDAY, JUNE 23, 2021, AT 3:00 P.M.**

**Present:**  Chair Jeff Silvestrini, Mayor Harris Sondak, Councilor Jim Bradley

**CWC Staff:** Executive Director Ralph Becker, Deputy Director Blake Perez, Communications Director Lindsey Nielsen, Office Administrator Manager Kaye Mickelson

**Visitor Use Study Work Group Members:**

Annalee Munsey, Jan Striefel, Carl Fisher, Patrick Nelson, Will McCarvill

Absent: Helen Peters

**Responder:** Dr. Jordan Smith, Utah State University

**Others:** Robert Sampson, Pat Shea

* **Open Budget Finance Committee Meeting: Chair of the Committee, Mayor Jeff Silvestrini, Will Open the Meeting and Note that the Meeting is to Occur only Electronically without a Physical Location.**

Chair Jeff Silvestrini called the meeting to order at 3:00 p.m. He explained that it was a joint meeting of the Central Wasatch Commission (“CWC”) Budget/Finance/Audit Committee and the Visitor Use Study Work Group. The purpose of the meeting was to further discuss the proposal for Phase II of the Visitor Use Study.

1. **Discussion/Direction: Discussion with Dr. Jordan Smith Regarding Study Methodology and Phase II.**

Deputy Director, Blake Perez explained that the meeting was a continuation of the previous Budget/Finance/Audit Committee Meeting held on June 14, 2021. During that meeting, there was discussion related to Phase II of the Visitor Use Study. A lot of those discussions had to do with the costs and the social component of the study. Dr. Jordan Smith from Utah State University was now available to answer outstanding questions.

Mayor Sondak had issues with the construct validity and the reliability of the social aspects of the study. He commented that people were not good at forecasting their contingent future behavior. Additionally, acceptable levels of visitor use would depend entirely on past experiences and personalities. An extrovert may want to see 10 people on the trail while an introvert may not want to see anyone on the trail. He noted that acceptable levels of visitor use would also shift and change over time. Mayor Sondak posed a number of questions:

* What are we going to do with the data?
* How biased are the estimates?
* How do those estimates change over time?

Dr. Smith agreed that perceptions of acceptable visitor use would change over time. As people got used to busier settings, those busier settings may become desirable or more normalized in certain locations. Dr. Smith explained that what they tried to do was measure indicators across a variety of different sites so they knew where the specific thresholds were. There would be different metrics based on individual sites. For example, if individuals were surveyed at Snowbird, the acceptable number of visitors would be much higher than at another location, like Lake Blanche.

All of the study work was guided by the Interagency Visitor Use Management Council and their Visitor Capacity Guidebook. The guidebook was created across several different federal agencies and included the U.S. Forest Service. It provided standardized guidance for how those agencies could manage and set capacity limits. Dr. Smith noted that visitor capacity was measured through both ecological capacity and social capacity. He shared a graph with the Budget/Finance/Audit Committee and explained that the X-axis on the graph measured the level of use and the Y-axis on the graph measured the acceptability of the social impacts.

Dr. Smith noted that it was important to study social capacity. In different locations, the acceptable social indicators could vary widely. Visitors at Snowbird might see 20 other groups on a hike and feel that was acceptable. Visitors at Lake Blanche might see two other groups on a hike and feel that was not acceptable. As a result, it was important to have multiple capacity indicator measures, such as ecological capacity and social capacity. If the study only looked at ecological capacity, there would not be information about the variability of the sites. The value of studying social capacity as well as ecological capacity was that it would provide additional information.

Mayor Sondak wondered what would happen if there was a site that had not been poorly impacted ecologically and visitors believed additional use levels would be appropriate. Dr. Smith noted that if there was not a lot of ecological damage but use was high, the priority would be placed on the ecological integrity of the site. Will McCarvill commented that the model described had to do with the management of areas where there could be both minimal social connections as well as areas where there could be denser social connections.

Mr. McCarvill reported that he had read the Uinta-Wasatch-​Cache National Forest Plan. That plan believed there was enough capacity in the forest to have some special areas as well as areas that were more heavily used. However, the flaw in that plan was that the urban environment continued to grow. It may be beneficial to look at a new model. Mr. McCarvill did not believe there was enough capacity in the Wasatch to satisfy the desire for areas with minimal social connections.

Dr. Smith noted that the Forest Service identified recreation opportunities that they wanted to manage across the entire forest unit. In locations like the Uinta-Wasatch-​Cache, where there were heavily urbanized areas, the areas that were managed for solitude or wilderness experiences tended to be more distant from the urban centers. Looking at the entire forest as the unit of analysis led to areas further away from the Wasatch Front being managed for less use and everything on the Wasatch Front becoming a high-use area. Dr. Smith felt that approach was a mistake because there were individuals that wanted wilderness experiences along the Wasatch Front. The Visitor Use Study could identify specific sites that could preserve those kinds of experiences.

Carl Fisher commented that visitation and visitor perspectives had been explored by Save Our Canyons in a 2015 survey. He explained that many people who went out for solitude did not find encounters with other visitors to be negative. However, he noted that there was likely a threshold where those types of encounters would become negative. That was something Mr. Fisher was interested in understanding. He was also interested in some of economic barriers that prevented people from visiting the canyons. Mr. Fisher hoped to hear from non-users and casual users rather than only habitual users of the canyons. Mayor Sondak pointed out that the plan was to survey people who were on site. Discussions were had about traffic congestion and transportation issues.

Mr. McCarvill believed that environmental protection was the number one priority. He felt the ecological capacity aspect of the Visitor Use Study would be especially important. Mr. McCarvill noted that while some canyon visitors may not want to see other users on trails, there would be some level of social change over time. The priority needed to be on the environment more so than the preference of visitors. Mr. Fisher expressed concerns related to hardened areas.

Mayor Sondak noted that there were two aspects of the study that were relatively expensive: the mobile location data and the surveys. Dr. Smith explained that the purpose of the mobile location data was to provide a historical perspective. It would also allow the study to look at many different locations throughout the Central Wasatch. Trail counters could be set out at standard locations and monitored throughout the year. However, that would only include 30 or so locations. The mobile location data would be broader and include specific trail segments. Using both the trail counter data and mobile location data could create more comprehensive data.

The survey data would provide information about acceptable visitor use levels in specific settings. It would create one more measure and help determine when visitor use levels were unacceptable. Dr. Smith explained that the other benefit of the survey data was that it could make it easier to further understand the repercussions of displaced recreation. For instance:

* If a capacity limit was set in a particular area, what would the repercussions of that limitation be? How would that limitation impact other nearby areas?

Mayor Sondak asked Dr. Smith about the increased levels of outdoor recreation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Smith noted that preliminary indicators in similar studies saw that outdoor use remained at pandemic levels early in 2021. It would take time to know what those use levels would look like in the long run. Jan Striefel believed it would be best to let the experts do what they needed to do and move forward with the full study. Mayor Sondak noted that the cost for the Visitor Use Study was high and he still had some concerns. Ms. Striefel felt the cost was necessary to obtain all of the information.

Office Administrator Manager, Kaye Mickelson noted that there had been questions related to personnel and salaries. Dr. Smith explained that there was tenure track faculty and senior staff. He discussed the summer salaries and noted that time commitments were built into the proposals.

Chair Silvestrini commented that the Visitor Use Study was a substantial budget expenditure. There would be some State money for the study but the CWC would still need to take money from reserves for a significant portion of the funding. He wondered whether that was something the Budget/Finance/Audit Committee wanted to do. Chair Silvestrini also wondered whether those present had any additional questions to ask Dr. Smith.

Executive Director, Ralph Becker made note of the increased visitation levels that had taken place across the country since the start of the pandemic. He explained that some areas were able to regulate visitation due to transportation limitations. Mr. Becker wondered what would happen when transportation capacity was increased and to what extent it would be possible to protect both the environment and user experience. He understood the need to protect a range of outdoor experiences. However, he wondered to what extent that would be possible. Mr. Becker posed a number of questions to Dr. Smith:

* Is it reasonable to talk about retaining solitude in the Wasatch?
* Are those types of experiences achievable?
* What measures would it take to achieve solitude?

Dr. Smith felt it was possible to achieve solitude in the Wasatch. Experiences of solitude were dependent on context (overall perceptions and expectations) but standard measures of crowding and density could put things into perspective. He commented that the range of outdoor experiences needed to be preserved where possible. Pat Shea suggested prioritizing the studies in a sequence. Once the ecological aspect of the study was complete, the social aspect could be done. Dr. Smith noted that both ecological and social indicators were dependent upon the desired conditions set by the management agency. The science should inform those desired conditions.

Chair Silvestrini asked Ms. Mickelson to overview possible funding strategies. Strategy 2 was discussed. Ms. Mickelson explained that an appropriation of $95,000 was received from the State Legislature for a portion of the study. Approximately $34,000 of that would be put towards Phase I and the remaining $61,000 would be applied to Phase II. During the 2021-2022 budget building process, $50,000 had been returned to reserves. However, it would be possible to pull that money back from reserves and add the remaining funds from the appropriation for a total of $111,000 for Phase II. Additional funds would still be needed. They could be requested from Salt Lake City, Salt Lake County, and other entities. Ms. Mickelson reported that approximately $143,500 of additional funds would be needed to complete the study.

Strategy 3 involved asking for more money from the State, but that was not currently an option. Strategy 4 was to spend down the reserves and ask member jurisdictions to increase their contributions. Strategy 5 was to spend down the reserves. Ms. Mickelson explained that other items, such as short-term projects and other budgeted costs, would need to be eliminated. Strategy 6 stated that because the length of the study had been extended, funding could take place over two fiscal years. There would be a dollar amount of $247,000 from the next fiscal year and $40,000 from fiscal year 2022-2023.

Mr. Shea wondered whether it would be possible for Dr. Smith to break down the numbers. The CWC could look into funding the ecological aspect of the study first, have Dr. Smith report back, and then make a decision about whether or not to fund the social aspect. Councilor Jim Bradley asked when an ecological assessment would be available. Ms. Mickelson reported that the extended Visitor Use Study would be completed in August 2022 and there would be seasonal reports from Utah State University for the Commission to review.

Councilor Bradley wondered whether the Visitor Use Study data would be able to assist with the Utah Department of Transportation (“UDOT”) Little Cottonwood Canyon Environmental Impact Statement (“EIS”) discussions. Chair Silvestrini noted that the decision to extend the Visitor Use Study was done knowing that UDOT would likely release their Draft EIS before the completion of the study. He asked Dr. Smith if it would be possible to break down the second phase of the study into ecological and social aspects. Dr. Smith explained that he could break out the cost differences or eliminate the social surveys from the current scope of work if that was desired. Chair Silvestrini felt it would be better to separate the costs rather than eliminate certain costs. It would be useful to see a breakdown of the numbers.

Mayor Sondak reported that he recently had a conversation with Laura Briefer. She had communicated with Josh Van Jura from UDOT. Mr. Van Jura stated that even if the preferred transportation alternative was issued shortly, UDOT would still be interested in CWC feedback between the time the preferred alternative was issued and the time the final recommendation was made. Mr. Becker explained that CWC Staff had done some follow-up with UDOT since then. They were not certain that they could use any of the Visitor Use Study information but encouraged the CWC to do what they wanted to do. He added that the recreation manager for most of the Wasatch was the Forest Service. The Forest Service was more receptive than they had been in the past and had been communicating well with the CWC.

Chair Silvestrini asked about the timeframe for the ecological aspect of the Visitor Use Study. Dr. Smith reported that the ecological assessment would be done over two seasons. They would collect the appropriate indicators, such as exposed soil, the number of social trails created, and water quality indicators over those two seasons. There would ideally be a fall data collection in fall 2021 and then spring data collection in spring 2022. He noted that had been the original proposal.

Ms. Striefel wondered whether the ecological aspect of the Visitor Use Study would establish the maximum number of visitors that could be in a place before environmental degradation occurred. Dr. Smith noted that the study would look at the relationship between visitor use and environmental degradation. Ms. Striefel believed the social aspect of the study would make it possible to better manage the resource. Dr. Smith explained that the ecological assessment was one measure of capacity and the social assessment was another measure of capacity. The social aspect of the Visitor Use Study would provide additional data that could potentially assist capacity-related decisions in the future. Ms. Striefel felt it was important to move forward with the full study and to obtain all of the necessary information from the experts.

Chair Silvestrini asked whether there would be cost savings if the ecological and social aspects of the study were done together. Dr. Smith reported that there were economies of scale. The same crew would be used to do the ecological site assessments and the visitor surveys. The human resource costs would be less if the ecological and social aspects of the study were done at the same time. He explained that it would cost more to separate them out.

Councilor Bradley had concerns related to funding. He was nervous about being able to obtain enough funding without jeopardizing other CWC work. He noted that spreading the study out over two fiscal years could make budgeting easier. Councilor Bradley appreciated the perspective shared by Ms. Striefel but noted that the ecological assessment was critical. Chair Silvestrini felt there were benefits to both pieces of the study. If there was an economy that could be achieved by doing the data collection at one time, it made sense to try to figure out how to fund that. He commented that it could require the CWC to sacrifice other programs in order to do so. The Visitor Use Study had been a priority for a long time but there were decisions to be made about funding.

Mr. Fisher commented that Save Our Canyons would be willing to contribute to the Visitor Use Study. Additionally, they could help write grants in order to potentially augment some of the funding. He noted that there were real costs being borne by municipalities as visitation continued to increase. The information from the Visitor Use Study would make it easier for local governments and the Forest Service to better plan for future needs. Mayor Sondak noted that the offer of support from Save Our Canyons was very generous. Further discussions were had about possible funding sources for Phase II of the study.

Mr. Becker wondered whether the Budget/Finance/Audit Committee would feel comfortable making a recommendation to the CWC Board. He noted that Dr. Smith might be able to provide a breakdown of the study as it related to the ecological and social costs. That way when the CWC Board met in July, there would be a significant amount of information available. Ms. Mickelson commented that Phase II of the study had undergone a lot of review by the Budget/Finance/Audit Committee and the Visitor Use Study Work Group. They could conceivably recommend that the proposal be paid over two fiscal years. That would allow time for fundraising efforts and a minimal amount to be taken from reserves.

Discussions were had about a possible recommendation to the CWC Board. Mayor Sondak noted that the Budget/Finance/Audit Committee could make a recommendation to go ahead with the full study. The CWC Board could make a change to the reserve policy or the CWC could look into fundraising efforts from other entities. Mr. Shea suggested there be a recommendation to continue with the study but that the study be divided into two phases: ecological and social. Mr. Fisher wondered whether that would end up costing more in the long run. Mayor Sondak believed it would as there would need to be separate data collection for the social aspects of the study.

Councilor Bradley asked how flexible Dr. Smith could be. For instance, he wondered what would happen if the CWC was able to find funding in the next few months. Dr. Smith explained that if the CWC wanted to do an ecological assessment in the summer, that could be done. If additional funding sources became available later for the social study, that work could be folded in. They would need to make up the difference and run the surveys for whatever period of time went beyond the start of the study. Mayor Sondak wondered when Phase I would be completed. Dr. Smith reported that Phase I of the original agreement had an estimated timeline of October 2021. They were almost ready to finalize the preliminary report on the Legislative review, existing data review, and interviews. That would be shared with the CWC soon.

Mayor Sondak wondered whether there would be duplicate data from the ecological collection proposed in Phase II. Dr. Smith explained that there was some existing ecological data but it was not consistent throughout the entire area. The data needed to be collected in a consistent and uniform fashion. He did not believe there would be any overlap or duplication of data.

**MOTION:** Mayor Sondak moved that the Budget/Finance/Audit Committee recommend to the CWC Board that they move forward with a phased approach for the Visitor Use Study. The CWC would engage their own resources for the ecological aspects of the proposed Phase II study and wait to see what financing was available before moving forward with the social aspects of the proposed Phase II study. Councilor Bradley seconded the motion. The motion passed with the unanimous consent of the Committee.

Chair Silvestrini felt it was important to determine how to present the information to the CWC Board. Mayor Sondak suggested that they inform Commissioners that there was universal support for the ecological aspects and a fair amount of consensus for the social aspects of the study. The Budget/Finance/Audit Committee had tried to prioritize the different aspects due to funding concerns. Ms. Mickelson noted that the next CWC Board Meeting would be on July 12, 2021.

Mr. Shea volunteered to assist CWC Staff in writing a two-page memorandum that explained past complications related to Phase II of the Visitor Use Study and how they wanted to proceed. Chair Silvestrini liked the idea. Mr. Becker suggested that the two-page summary could be put together and then circulated to the Committee for further refinement. It could then be forwarded to the full Commission for review prior to the next CWC Board Meeting.

Annalee Munsey commented that she had discussed funding strategies and the scope of the Visitor Use Study proposal with Sandy City and Salt Lake City. Chair Silvestrini thanked Ms. Munsey. He also noted that he would speak further with Mr. Becker about the best way to present the information to the CWC Board. Chair Silvestrini thanked Dr. Smith for his time and for attending the Budget/Finance/Audit Committee Meeting.

* **CLOSE BUDGET/FINANCE/AUDIT COMMITTEE MEETING**

1. **Chair Jeff Silvestrini will Close the Committee Meeting as Chair of the Budget/Finance/Audit Committee of the Central Wasatch Commission.**

**MOTION:** Councilor Bradley moved to adjourn the Budget/Finance/Audit Committee. Mayor Sondak seconded the motion. The motion passed with the unanimous consent of the Committee.

The Central Wasatch Commission Budget/Finance/Audit Committee Meeting adjourned at approximately 4:48 p.m.

***I hereby certify that the foregoing represents a true, accurate, and complete record of the Central Wasatch Commission Budget/Finance/Audit Committee Meeting held Wednesday, June 23, 2021.***

Teri Forbes

Teri Forbes

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Minutes Secretary

Minutes Approved: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_