

FOREST SERVICE BRIEFING PAPER
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Topic: Mill Creek Canyon Shuttle Service Proposal Requirements

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Issue: Mill Creek Canyon has experienced exponentially increasing visitation in recent years, heightening public interest in the implementation of shuttle service in the Canyon due to its limited parking capacity. Although the Forest Service supports the concept of shuttle service in Mill Creek Canyon, the agency is limited in its capacity to consider a proposal for shuttle service due to current fiscal and resource limitations. To expedite Forest Service consideration of shuttle service in Mill Creek Canyon, external project proponent(s) could submit a detailed proposal to the agency for evaluation. If the proposal were determined to be feasible by the Forest Service, the project proponent(s) could then have a qualified consultant prepare a NEPA analysis to inform a Forest Service decision. **A proposal would need to be formally submitted to the Forest Service by July 31, 2023, to provide adequate time for consideration.**

Background: The Forest Service supports the concept of shuttle service in Mill Creek Canyon. Shuttle services were considered as part of the partner agencies', including Salt Lake County, Forest Service and the city of Millcreek, application for the Federal Highways Administration (FHWA) Upper Mill Creek Canyon Federal Lands Access Program (FLAP) Project. Due to the competitive nature of the FLAP program and its limited funding authority, the scope of the requested project had to be narrowed and priority was placed on improving the safety and reliability of the road, with an intent to also facilitate future shuttle service.

To expedite Forest Service consideration of shuttle service in the near term, a detailed proposal would need to be prepared by external proponent(s). If the proposal was determined to be feasible by the Forest Service, it would then need to be analyzed under the Forest Service National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations. Pending the results of the NEPA analysis, the Forest Service would make a decision of whether to authorize the service on National Forest System (NFS) lands.

2003 Revised Wasatch-Cache Forest Plan Consistency

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 Wastach-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.

Parking

For the purposes of watershed and resource protection, the Forest Plan contains a Desired Future Condition to maintain parking capacity in the Canyon at year-2000 levels. While parking capacity has crept above year-2000 levels since the last revision of the Forest Plan, the Forest Service continues to work to limit parking capacity in the canyon and will not consider proposals that significantly increase parking capacity unless the increase is in direct support of a transit or shuttle system. However, given the limited space and natural resource restrictions within the Canyon, it is assumed that parking for a shuttle service must be located outside of the Canyon and off NFS lands.

Upper Mill Creek Canyon Federal Lands Access Program (FLAP) Project

This project is intended to improve the safety and reliability of the road above the Winter Gate, through improvements to the roadway, drainage, crosswalks, and parking areas (FHWA's proposed action being considered under NEPA, based on the funding program and coordination with the partner agencies). Presently, parking capacity is one of the primary factors in the Canyon limiting visitation and use. The FLAP project is not intended to increase parking capacity in the Canyon, rather it will formalize parking where it is safe and environmentally sustainable, and eliminate unsafe parking, such as roadside parking which contributes to resource damages. The FHWA is the lead agency for the FLAP project and will make a decision on the preferred alternative for roadway and associated trailhead improvements under the FHWA NEPA regulations.

During public outreach in the early phases of the project, public comments were received requesting that shuttles be considered as part of the FLAP project, in part to address unsafe parking conditions. The initial FLAP application submitted by the partner agencies requested both an infrastructure project for the entire Canyon, and a planning services project for a future public transit system. Due to the competitive nature and limited funding authority of the FLAP program, the scope of the requested project had to be narrowed. The partner agencies and FHWA agreed to limit the project to an infrastructure project in the upper part of the Canyon. This decision was based on available funding and the partner agencies' priority of improving the safety and reliability of the roadway prior to considering a shuttle service. Although a planning services project for a shuttle service was not carried forward, the infrastructure project in the upper Canyon facilitates potential future shuttle service to the extent practical, considering limited space and natural resource restrictions within the upper Canyon. The partner agencies also intend to pursue road improvements in the lower part of the Canyon under a future project, which would also include an objective to facilitate future, or existing shuttle service at that time.

Timing

As discussed above, the Forest Service supports the concept of a shuttle service on NFS lands in Mill Creek Canyon. Furthermore, the Forest Service recognizes that visitor demand may exceed parking capacity in the lower canyon during the period when the upper canyon is closed for construction. This issue could potentially be mitigated by a shuttle system in the lower canyon.

Any proposed shuttle service on NFS lands in Mill Creek Canyon requires the submission of a formal proposal to the Forest Service and, if approved, analysis under the Forest Service NEPA regulations, and a subsequent Forest Service decision. A comprehensive, detailed proposal would

need to be formally submitted to the Forest Service by **July 31, 2023**, to provide adequate time for consideration, NEPA analysis, a Forest Service decision, and potential implementation of a shuttle service prior to the anticipated start of construction in the upper canyon.

Recommendation: To expedite Forest Service consideration of shuttle service in Mill Creek Canyon, an external project proponent could prepare a formal proposal for Forest Service consideration by **July 31, 2023**. If the Forest Service determined that the proposal was feasible the external project proponent could then procure and fund a qualified consultant to prepare a NEPA analysis of the proposal in accordance with Forest Service NEPA policies and at a level of analysis determined by the Forest Service. Following its review of the NEPA analysis, the Forest Service would then issue a decision on whether to authorize shuttle service on NFS lands in the Canyon. The complexity and required level of detail of this proposal may require the procurement of a qualified professional with the appropriate level of expertise.

A formal proposal for shuttle service on NFS lands must address the following:

- A phased approach to address potential future construction and road closures in the Canyon:
 - Phase 1 – Under the current Upper Mill Creek Canyon FLAP proposal, the road above the Winter Gate will be closed during construction. Construction is anticipated from spring of 2025 through fall of 2026.
 - Phase 2 – The road throughout the entire Canyon is anticipated to be open after the end of construction in 2026.
 - Phase 3 – Improvements in the lower part of the Canyon could potentially start as early as 2029 and could take two to three construction seasons to complete. Although contingencies will have to be made for private businesses within the Canyon, it is anticipated that the road below the Winter Gate will be closed. The potential of limited/ periodic shuttle service in the Canyon during this time will need to be discussed with the project’s lead agency and construction contractor when the project is authorized.
 - Phase 4 – The road throughout the entire Canyon is anticipated to be open at the completion of construction in the lower part of the Canyon.
- Seasonality and types of use in the Canyon, depending on whether the Winter Gate is open or closed.
- Development of a model of visitation based on temporal and spatial distribution projections of shuttle ridership. The model should address anticipated recreational use at proposed shuttle stops as well as existing trailheads and facilities where shuttle service will not be provided.
- Infrastructure requirements at proposed shuttle stops, including but not limited to restroom capacity, trailhead resource impacts, trail network impacts, and quality of user experience.
- Identification of potential resource concerns and develop design criteria and best management practices to mitigate anticipated impacts.

- Identification of any necessary permitting and/ or mitigation determined by Salt Lake County for the use of their road easement over NFS lands.
- Ongoing coordination with private landowners in the Canyon concerning the proposed shuttle service.
- Address the financial feasibility of the service, including how the offset of Mill Creek Canyon fees will be proportionally recompensated to Salt Lake County, since most of these fees are provided to the Forest Service for maintenance and improvements in the Canyon.

Furthermore, a comprehensive proposal must address interrelated and interdependent activities such as, but not limited to, where users will park and board shuttles outside of NFS lands. This may require consultation and coordination with adjoining jurisdictions such as Salt Lake County and the city of Millcreek.

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