

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

Witness Statement

Testimony of Kathryn Higgins, Vice President of Public Policy
National Trust for Historic Preservation
Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands
House Committee on Resources
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Mr. Chairman, thank you for giving the National Trust for Historic Preservation the opportunity to testify on legislation to restore and maintain two of the most historically important sites in our national park system, the Many Glacier Hotel and the Going to the Sun Road which takes visitors there.

The National Trust is grateful for the leadership Representative Hill has shown on this issue, and that both Senators Max Baucus and Conrad Burns Montana are joining him in trying to develop a common solution to the problems confronting the park.

Many of the historic structures that still exist in our great western parks, such as Glacier, were built by the railroad companies to lure Americans to the west and to the parks. For instance, Yellowstone owes many of its historic lodgings to Northern Pacific Railroad, who financed the cost of building Yellowstone's Lake Hotel and Old Faithful Inn.

Other railroads followed the example set by Northern Pacific. Soon after the Great Northern Railroad completed its route across northern Montana to Seattle, Louis Hill, Great Northern's president, became interested in a movement generated by noted outdoorsman, George Bird Grinnell, to establish a national park in northern Montana. Great Northern owned the land adjacent to the proposed park, and Hill saw the opportunity to increase railroad patronage by drawing tourists to the park that he billed "the American Alps". Hill's Glacier Park Hotel Co., a Great Northern Railroad subsidiary, became Glacier Park's first concessionaire.

Louis Hill's first major structure was Glacier Park Lodge, which was completed in 1913. Soon after Glacier Park Lodge was open to guests, Hill had a 53-mile road built from the railhead to Lake McDermott, the site of Many Glacier Hotel. Upon completion of the road, Hill's 400-man crew began construction on Many Glacier Hotel. The timbers for the lobby of Many Glacier came from the Pacific Northwest and had to be hauled over the new dirt road. The smaller timbers were cut from Many Glacier Valley and milled on site. Stone for the foundation was also quarried on site. Construction of the hotel was begun in the spring of 1914, and the Many Glacier Hotel opened for overnight guests on July 4th, 1915.

Many Glacier and the Glacier Park Lodge were part of a network of Swiss styled lodges and chalets. Guests could escape to "the American Alps" and stay in lodges where they were served by waitresses in dirndls and busboys in lederhosen. Unfortunately, time and wear have taken their toll on Many Glacier. Today, a guest

is welcomed by cracks in the masonry, sagging roofs, a broken picture window on the ground floor, and the infamous "stagger alley" where sections of the wall lean in odd directions. Because of their historic and architectural significance, the remaining lodges and chalets in Glacier National Park are National Historic Landmarks, but the future of these national treasures remains uncertain.

The National Trust has been actively pursuing strategies for the preservation of Many Glacier Hotel since 1996. We included the historic structures of Glacier National Park on the 1996 List of America's Most Endangered Places to call attention to the preservation needs of Glacier's magnificent historic lodges and chalets built by the Great Northern Railroad. In 1997, the National Trust gave the Park an \$8,000 grant to help underwrite the cost of an historic structures report for Many Glacier that would identify and evaluate historical and architectural features that should be preserved or restored as part of a rehabilitation effort.

Last summer, the Regional Director of our Mountains/Plains Office in Denver testified at this subcommittee's field hearing at the hotel and recommended several ways Congress could address the preservation needs of Many Glacier Hotel. Some of the solutions proposed in Congressman Hill's bill were recommended in that testimony, including steps to make it possible to use the commercial historic tax credit to help offset the costs of rehabilitation. We fear that without an investment of at least \$17 million to address building code and life safety issues, correct structural problems, replace the roof and repair windows, Many Glacier may not survive to welcome future generations of visitors to Glacier National Park. The current concessionaire believes at least another \$32 million is necessary to upgrade the hotel's rooms and add other visitor amenities.

The National Trust believes that some degree of improvement in the hotel's rooms is advisable. The prospects for obtaining these funds from federal sources are not good, and it also does not seem possible for the current concessionaire to make this level of investment under the terms of the current contract. Despite the fact that Many Glacier operates at close to 100% occupancy, the short season and limited number of rooms puts a cap on potential revenue. There are 211 rooms in the Many Glacier Hotel, and the rates, which run from \$106 to \$205, are determined by the National Park Service. The season is limited due to weather conditions, so the hotel is only in operation from June to September. The hotel's \$2 million in revenue does not compare to revenues in hotels outside of the park, and cannot provide an adequate return on the rehabilitation investments now necessary.

We are very supportive of the National Park Service's proposal for an historic lease financing authority, which is not contained in Rep. Hill's bill but which we believe the Montana delegation supports. The National Trust is willing to help in any way possible to develop this method of allowing a developer investing in the rehabilitation of the hotel to qualify for the commercial tax credit. Any such lease should include performance standards to insure that the public interest is adequately served and the building is protected and regularly maintained. We also believe the restoration of the Going to the Sun Highway, itself a National Historic Landmark, is critically important. However, we urge a cautious approach to the issue of providing the hotel with modern conference facilities. If possible, upgrading and enhancing spaces in the existing hotel rather than construction of new facilities should be pursued.

I urge this subcommittee to approve legislation, which will give the National Park Service the authority it needs to allow this important work at Many Glacier to proceed.

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