

Committee on Resources

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Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, & Public Lands

Witness Statement

STATEMENT BY

STEPHEN R. WELCH, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, THE PINES RESORT,

BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, RECREATION, AND PUBLIC LANDS, U.S.
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, CONCERNING IMPLEMENTATION OF
THE

YOSEMITE VALLEY PLAN

APRIL 22, 2003

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to represent the concerns of the people of Madera County with respect to the Yosemite Valley Plan.

Your written communication indicates that the purpose of this Public Hearing is to “examine the implementation of the Yosemite Valley Plan.” Once again, we respectfully request that the Committee thoroughly investigate the flawed process by which this Plan was developed, calling into question the validity of the Plan itself. Charged with oversight of the National Park Service, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and thus the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) which NEPA created, the Committee is in a unique position to recommend that this Yosemite Valley Plan be rescinded before the magnificent splendor that is Yosemite National Park is destroyed forever.

Madera County continues to stand by our testimony presented at the 2001 Subcommittee Hearing in Washington, DC. We believe our comments are every bit as valid now as they were then—especially as we observe the negative impacts of the 15 Valley Plan projects that have garnered the Committee’s support. Restating our position, we request:

- 1) No funding be appropriated for this Yosemite Valley Plan (and YARTS)
- 2) Set aside/rescind this Yosemite Valley Plan (and YARTS)
- 3) All excess flood funding (\$110 million) be returned to the U.S. Treasury
- 4) Redo the Merced River Plan in full compliance with the protective mandate of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, thus creating a solid foundation for all future plans

As Congressman Radanovich has publicly stated in the press, “the preparation of the plan, in fact the entire planning process, has been fatally flawed.” To allow these Plans (Yosemite Valley Plan authorized by the Merced River Plan) to be implemented, as legally enabled by a Record of Decision, reflects the same lack of integrity as the corrupt process by which they were developed. We urge Congress and the Bush Administration to exercise jurisdictional oversight and demand agency accountability.

And though we recognize that camping and parking issues are of particular interest today, they are only two isolated “symptoms.” The Committee needs to address the root “disease”—the expired 1980 General Management Plan, the Merced River Plan, and the Yosemite Valley Plan—clear and compelling evidence of a planning process corrupted by a predetermined agenda.

YOSEMITE NEVER HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR DECEPTIVE FLOOD REQUEST

When Congress passed Public Law 105-18 in June of 1997 awarding a \$187,321,000 flood recovery package to Yosemite National Park, it was with the understanding that it would be used “...for “construction” for emergency expenses resulting from flooding and other natural disasters...” Yet then-Superintendent B.J. Griffin testified at the subcommittee El Portal Oversight Hearing (3/22/97) that more than \$123 million was for pre-flood projects.

And as stated in the “Trip Report for Field Hearing on Yosemite Floods and to Conduct a review of the \$200 million Emergency Supplemental Request for Appropriations for Yosemite” prepared for this Committee (3/26/97) by a member of your professional staff:

“According to the transmittal by the White House to Congress, ‘Each request has been kept to the absolute essential level and is limited to the amount necessary to restore damaged property—that is, damage caused directly by the disaster—to its pre-damaged condition.’ This is not true with respect to the request for Yosemite Park. In addition, the National Park Service has stated that its recovery proposal is guided by three principles: (1) the 1980 General Management Plan, (2) protection of park facilities from a similar level of flooding in the future, and (3) reduction of the development footprint in Yosemite Valley. These statements are also not accurate.”

“It is also clear that the National Park Service is using the occasion of the flood to advance an entirely separate agenda from flood restoration.”

Apparently, such controversial warning signs were pushed aside in favor of the political capital that could be gained in solidifying funding to repair one of the world’s treasures; you trusted that the funds would be used with integrity—even though in most cases there was no valid plan in place. But the “red flags” that were courageously raised in that congressional report have come back to haunt all of us; they are the centerpiece of why we’re here today and they have fueled the controversy that has surrounded the Yosemite planning process for the past six years. Yosemite planning is driven by funding already received—money that is burning a hole in the agency’s pocket.

AN URBAN BUS PLAN—PERIOD!!!

Yosemite planning efforts since 1980 have obsessed about the “evil” of cars and plotted their ultimate removal from Yosemite Valley.

The Carter Administration’s 1980 General Management Plan (GMP) advocated freeing the Valley “from the noise, the smell, the glare, and the environmental degradation caused by thousands of vehicles.” Insistent on removing all private automobiles from Yosemite Valley, it further stated “the ultimate solution...in parks generally and in Yosemite specifically rests upon integration with regional transportation systems.”

The 1994 Alternative Transportation Feasibility Study, in response to Public Law 102-240, recommended changes in Valley traffic circulation to facilitate implementation of a mass transit system: a shuttle transfer point and tour bus parking at Camp 6; elimination of visitor traffic on Northside Drive, except for emergency use; relocation/removal of Upper and Lower River campgrounds, restoring campgrounds to natural conditions; closing Stoneman Bridge road between Curry Village and Yosemite Village; widening Southside Drive for two-way traffic as major access to the Valley; removal of stables; and more. The goal was to restrict access to the East end of the Valley, routing traffic instead across Sentinel Bridge to the transit center.

The 1997 Flood Recovery Action Plan states “the Draft Yosemite Valley Implementation Plan, must be approved before the transportation or campground replacement components of recovery can go forward.” What replacement components of recovery? There was nothing to recover! As stated in the Trip Report for the El Portal Field Hearing (3/26/97): “The cost to re-open the campgrounds would be far less than relocating them elsewhere within the floodplain. The concessioner expressed an interest in taking over the campgrounds and could...rehabilitate...them at little cost to the Federal government.” A review of the campground and transportation packages makes it immediately apparent that the flood was used as occasion to garner funding for the predetermined agenda.

Actively involved in gaining endorsement of the Flood Recovery Package, Secretary Babbitt was soon a co-signer with Secretary Rodney Slater as part of a Department of Interior/Department of Transportation Memorandum of Understanding orchestrated by President Clinton (November 1997); the MOU specifically targeted three parks for vehicle reduction and mass transit implementation—the Grand Canyon, Zion, and Yosemite. This action was nothing more than an executive order, a federal mandate—the public never had any say.

Then in May of 1998, Congress passed the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA 21)—a comprehensive bill which funded various surface transportation programs at a total of \$217 billion over 6 years. This bill opened up a tremendous number of additional funding opportunities to the National Parks (\$165 million annually) and specifically referenced development of “a regional transportation system as well as in-park transit and intermodal transportation circulation plans” at Yosemite National Park. Shortly thereafter, DOT shared full-time staff on site at Yosemite specifically charged with implementing a transit program.

The 2000 Merced River Management Plan laid out the zoning blueprint that will ultimately forbid placement

of camping or parking where it has existed for years. Additionally, the Plan eliminated air quality and natural quiet as Outstandingly Remarkable Values. The Plan has been steeped in litigation claiming a lack of scientific credibility and failure to quantify carrying capacity; that zoning decisions were made arbitrarily to accommodate plans that had been on the table for more than 20 years. (Appeal hearing was held March 11, 2003 with judgment to be rendered within 2-3 months.) Designed to amend the GMP, the River Plan laid the foundation for the ultimate busing plan—the Yosemite Valley Plan.

The 2000 Yosemite Valley Plan alternatives were named by virtue of their bus staging areas and forecast more than 500+ roundtrip shuttles, 76+ tour buses, and an unspecified number of YARTS buses entering the park daily during peak season. Buses arrive at a 22-bay transit center near Camp 6, one every 1.4 minutes. Mirroring the 1994 Transportation study, the Upper and Lower River Campgrounds are gone, the stables are gone, Southside is to be widened for two-way traffic, and Northside closed to visitor traffic. And though the 1994 study refused to even consider remote staging areas for reasons of cost, visitor confusion, visitor delay, information challenges, management difficulties, and loss of personal freedom—remote staging areas are exactly what the Yosemite Valley Plan proposes. As stated in the Los Angeles Times (11/14/00), “Babbitt personally intervened in the drafting of the final report. He has said he regards the Yosemite Valley Plan as central to the Clinton administration’s environmental legacy.”

What we have is a planning process fiercely clinging to the goals of Carter’s 1980 GMP—a plan which in its own preface states an expiration date of 10 years (or 1990), and which violates the mandate of NPS Director’s Order #2 (Park Planning). Since 1980 there have been a host of environmental regulations as well as advances in technology that have mandated cleaner air and resulted in near-zero emissions in autos; the same can not be said of buses. Yet no reevaluation has occurred. More than 20 years later, the “visionary” plans of the National Park Service are to replace clean cars with dirty buses; bus traffic will now replace auto traffic; buses make more noise, buses fill the air with diesel fumes; buses have expanded surface glare; and buses require massive amounts of man-made infrastructure which will result in significant and permanent environmental degradation. This is resource stewardship at its worst.

A BUS PLAN WITH NO JUSTIFICATION

One would think that after obsessing over buses and implementation of a mass transit scheme for the past 20 years, the National Park Service would have a well-developed plan, strongly supported by scientific documentation and validated by carrying capacity research to justify their case.

In a recently released (11/15/02) report, “National Park Service: Opportunities to Improve the Administration of the Alternative Transportation Program,” a U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) investigation reveals the lax and unsubstantiated manner by which the Park Service implements its busing mandates. Of the 20 projects studied (which included two from Yosemite), only one (Mesa Verde) provided thorough analysis.

Each busing proposal is supposed to address non-construction alternatives (i.e., simple remedies such as traffic management that would not involve road widening/realignment, bus depots, etc.). Each proposal mandates park capacity data (i.e., carrying capacity) to guarantee that a bus won’t bring in more people than what the carrying capacity will allow. Each proposal is supposed to address total cost including operations and maintenance costs. Each proposal is supposed to address analysis of cost effectiveness.

The first Yosemite project (\$3,100,000) was to “expand shuttle service in the park to meet increasing demand.” When evaluating that project, the GAO determined that NO information was provided in any of the four categories mentioned above. The second project (\$990,080) was to “develop a new traffic information system to help park address increased congestion and resource degradation.” The park provided information for only 1 category—non-construction alternatives; the other 3 categories were left blank.

A particularly revealing statement: “A major objective of the program [alternative transportation] is to improve the quality of visitor enjoyment by relieving traffic and parking congestion in parks. However, because the agency has not established performance goals for reducing such congestion or identified how congestion is measured, there is no effective means of evaluating performance to determine what, if any, progress is being made. In the absence of specific programmatic performance goals and measures, evaluating the results of the program, and individual projects, is based on the subjective judgments of program managers.”

It appears we have a “force people out of their cars” program, a draconian measure that will forever transform the way the American public will visit their national parks. Personal freedom, privilege and responsibility will be removed; visitors will be herded like cattle onto an assembly line of buses; resource degradation will occur from diesel fumes, increased paving and infrastructure to accommodate massive bus fleets, as well as mass trampling at on/off stops. Congress continues to throw millions of dollars behind the program—and all the while there is no environmental, social, or economic justification. A savvy park manager who knows how to lobby can push a project through because those with approval authority apparently overlook requisite documented justification and analysis that identifies whether the project is even needed, park carrying capacity data, detailed operation and maintenance details and costs, or even a cost-

benefit analysis. This is unacceptable.

PARKING—now you see it, now you don't...

A 1998 letter from a 37-year park ranger, now an official park document, states "it is estimated there are roughly 3050 parking places left in Yosemite Valley. In my most conservative opinion, that is probably a third of what the Park had in the early 1960s."

The 1980 GMP states there are 2,513 existing day-visitor parking spaces; the Plan proposes to reduce that number to 1,271.

The 1994 Alternative Transportation Study states that the consultants were told by the National Park Service that there were 5,055 parking spaces in the entire Valley, including formal and informal lots and roadside areas. The consultants could only find 2,247 spaces available for visitor use, about ½ of those available to day visitors.

The Yosemite Valley Plan states there are approximately 3,500 total Valley parking spaces. Approximately 1,600 are used by day visitors: 904 spaces in the East Valley and 700 in the West Valley. It is the Plan's intention to reduce the total number of day visitor spaces to 550 in one consolidated location at Camp 6. However, a review of park documents clearly suggests those 550 are only temporary and that the ultimate goal is to remove ALL day visitor parking from Yosemite Valley.

--NPS Squad Meeting minutes, 5/27/99: "consensus that Camp 6 works well as a parking facility; better than Taft Toe...Immediate dispersion, less stress on shuttle system. Reality is that buses for next 10-15 years will be limited to diesel fuels (technology not there yet to improve them)...Camp 6 enables us to pull back in phases and ultimately remove parking from the East Valley (meeting GMP goals) while bringing the public along."

--NPS Merced River Plan meeting and process notes—DEIS Workshop #4, 10/6/99: "Camp 6 and/or Taft Toe would be destination hubs and would be the start of the regional transportation system, introduce transit. While still looking toward the long-range goal of GMP to reduce vehicles in valley, in the meantime still need to accommodate visitor vehicle—when elimination of private vehicle is accomplished, and it is not needed for transit, then would revert back to background zone."

--Draft Yosemite Valley Plan, 3/27/00: A total ban on private vehicles was "recommended because it is considered an ultimate goal of the 1980 General Management Plan. However the General Management Plan also recognized that the goal was infeasible at the time of its initial approval, and that a phased, collaborative approach would be needed to ultimately achieve this goal. Collaboration is ongoing to develop a regional transportation system [aka YARTS] that would provide initial and developmental steps toward achieving the ultimate goal. It is not possible to project when it would be feasible to remove all private vehicles from Yosemite Valley." (ES, page 2-28)

--Final Yosemite Valley Plan, 11/13/00: "Potential wetlands at the proposed Yosemite Village parking site [aka Camp 6] would be addressed by future compliance." (Volume 1B, page 4.2-17)

The National Park Service has failed to disclose to the public that Camp 6 is a temporary parking area. Furthermore, they have structured the zoning in the Merced River Plan so as to forbid parking in any other locations.

As stated previously:

n THE YOSEMITE VALLEY PLAN IS A BUSING PLAN THAT CLEARLY INTENDS TO PHASE OUT DAY VISITOR PARKING COMPLETELY; ALL PROJECTS ARE DESIGNED AROUND ACCOMPLISHING THAT GOAL

n REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION (aka YARTS) IS REGARDED BY THE NPS AS THE SOLUTION FOR REMOVING ALL PRIVATE VEHICLES FROM THE YOSEMITE VALLEY

n THE ZONING IN THE MERCED RIVER PLAN LEGALLY ENABLES IMPLEMENTATION OF AN URBAN BUSING SCHEME RESULTING IN REMOVAL OF DAY VISITOR PARKING.

FAMILY CAMPING AND PICNICKING—on the way out. . .

As mentioned earlier, the Upper and Lower River Campgrounds were slated for removal in 1994 as a means of streamlining traffic circulation. If such an idea had been suggested then, the public outcry would have been deafening. However, the 1997 flood provided the perfect opportunity to "take care of business."

It didn't matter that camping is a resource-focused activity as opposed to the resource exploitation that occurs with lodging, restaurants, stores, and other commercial ventures. It didn't matter that camping requires minimal permanent infrastructure; a flood can wash over a campground and merely cleans it—there is no permanent damage. In fact, in the case of the Rivers Campgrounds, the utilities were still intact following the flood; the damage resulted from the Park Service-constructed cement fireplaces that broke loose and battered everything in their path. It didn't matter that camping requires no special guest services, as does lodging; therefore, there is no need for additional employees and no need for more employee housing. Camping is a low-impact activity.

Interestingly enough, the National Park Service claimed in the 1997 Flood Recovery Action Plan, A Report to Congress that they needed \$17,673,476 for three packages (920, 921, 922) dedicated to campground flood recovery. As you recall, the White House and Congress stipulated that flood funds were to “restore damaged property—that is, damage caused directly by the disaster—to its pre-damaged condition.” But since there was no real damage, the flood became the ultimate opportunity to fund the demise of the campgrounds. The Trip Report for the Field Hearing warned there were no plans in place for what was being proposed; it further made mention that what was being proposed would “result in the reduction of about 300 campsites or about 40% below the level recommended in the General Management Plan” (the only valid(?) plan at the time). Yet Congress still appropriated the funding—plan or no plan—trusting that at such time as a plan was actually approved, the funding would be released. In effect, money already in hand poisoned the planning process; the agency had what they needed and public input was cast aside.

The 2000 Draft Yosemite Valley Plan, the only plan in which the Park Service actually itemized costs, shows campground-related projects that total \$11,407,000. What happened to the other \$6 million from the original flood request? And why did Congressman Radanovich feel the need to appropriate another \$2.1 million for a campground study? Why isn't the National Park Service being held accountable?

Adding insult to injury, the Yosemite Valley Plan reflects another sleight of hand. Making much ado about how they listened to public input, the final Plan increased the number of campsites from 475 to 500. But what escaped the public was that of the 500, only 330 would be drive-in sites. Compare that number with the 684 drive-in sites specified in the 1980 GMP and the more than 800 drive-in sites that existed prior to the 1980 GMP. That's a 60% reduction or a loss of more than 470 drive-in sites that will directly impact families with children, seniors, low-income, and those with limited physical capabilities. That is unacceptable.

Leveraging the media, the National Park Service with help from the Clinton Administration promoted the Merced River Plan and Yosemite Valley Plan as restoration plans—returning the Valley to nature. However, when the public protested the loss of campsites—an outcry to which this Committee is listening—it became clear that the Park Service needed to lay claim to the campgrounds and picnic areas to offer up any restoration at all. In a recent LA Times article (2/8/03), Jay Watson of the Wilderness Society revealed “This [removal of the River Campgrounds] is the heart and soul of the restoration effort in the Valley, and to renege on it would totally undermine the integrity of the plan.” In effect, the National Park Service has lied to the American people that the Yosemite Valley Plan is a restoration plan; follow the money—94% of the \$441 million price tag is allocated for facilities, transportation/circulation, administration/infrastructure, and employee housing; only 6% is dedicated to resource stewardship.

Meanwhile, popular picnic areas such as Swinging Bridge and Church Bowl are being closed while the remaining picnic areas will only be accessible by bus. As stated in the Plan: “The style of picnicking is thus likely to change for many visitors from car-based (grills, coolers, etc.) to daypack or box lunch picnics, with major adverse impacts. Some visitors might find it more convenient (and costly) to purchase food at food service facilities, losing the picnic experience.”

It appears that any Valley Plan claims of restoration and preservation are on the backs of campers and picnickers. Is it because these populations don't spend enough money in the park in relationship to their length of stay? This is unacceptable.

To restate—the Yosemite Valley Plan is a busing plan. Removal of the Rivers Campgrounds and Swinging Bridge/Church Bowl picnic areas will consolidate traffic circulation for busing; less drive-in campsites and bus-only picnic grounds will mean less cars in the Valley. The 1980 GMP clearly states “a total ban on private vehicles” using a “phased and collaborative approach” is the ultimate goal (i.e., one step at a time).

DO PARK PLANS FURTHER ECONOMIC DISCRIMINATION??

Delaware North Parks Services, commenting on its successful entry into the parks concessions business, was quoted (Buffalo News, 10/3/99) as looking for “full service kinds of parks...don't think we would be so interested in day-tripper kind of parks.” Yet Yosemite is 80% day visitors.

The Merced River Plan states, “As required by the NPS Concessions Management Improvement Act of 1998, the NPS cannot deny the park concessioner a reasonable opportunity for net profit. Should the

application of the management zoning prescriptions result in the potential removal of sufficient concession facilities to deny the primary park concessioner a reasonable opportunity for net profit (as required by law), this would constitute a major adverse impact to the concessioner under the socioeconomic impact analysis."

To avoid such a scenario, the Yosemite Valley Plan explores a combination of three mitigation options: increased prices for visitor services; entrance fee revenue to support facility use; and modify concessioner operations to improve profitability. Some interesting observations:

Overnight opportunities

Prior to the 1980 GMP, Yosemite Valley had 1528 lodging units and 800 drive-in campsites for a total of 2,328 overnight accommodations. The 2000 Yosemite Valley Plan reduced the numbers to 961 lodging units and 330 drive-in campsites for a total of 1,291 overnight accommodations. Simple subtraction shows a reduction of 1,037 overnight accommodations.

What does the 1,037 reduction include?

- removal of 470 drive-in campsites (originally 800 sites)
- removal of 200 tent cabins from Housekeeping (originally 300 units)
- removal of 253 tent cabins from Curry Village (originally 427 units)
- removal of 91 rustic cabins without bath at Yosemite Lodge

It would appear that low-end, inexpensive accommodations are the bulk of this reduction. Tent cabins rent for approximately \$50 per night; if room rates are raised \$50, the financial difference can be mitigated with less work and greater profit.

The Valley Plan states that "camping provides the lowest-priced accommodations in the park" and reductions will significantly impact a large user group (27%). Campers also tend to be a low-spending population.

Conversion to bus travel

The Valley Plan states "While in the park, about 35% of visitors arriving by private vehicle eat at a sit-down restaurant, 30% eat at a fast-food establishment, 30% buy groceries, 15% purchase books, 30% shop for souvenirs, and 15% shop for clothes. Except for grocery shopping, these percentages all increase for bus passengers."

Separating visitors from their private vehicles (i.e., rolling storage lockers) increases dependency on the concessioner resulting in a visitor experience that is more controlled, more costly, and more commercialized. Additionally, a 1988 report to Congress on the Feasibility of Increasing Bus Traffic to Yosemite recommended against any increase because "increasing the number of...buses allowed in the park would increase the number of bus passengers who represent an older, slightly wealthier, and a non-family unit, and would cause a resulting decrease in the number of traditional families, especially those with children, who rely upon an automobile to travel."

Minority and Low-Income Visitors/Environmental Justice

The Valley Plan states "It is generally believed that low-income and minority visitors to the park are under-represented in the total visitor population. However, the overnight accommodation and recreation patterns of low income and minority park visitors have not been studied in detail. As a result, the impacts on low-income and minority overnight and day visitors cannot be analyzed quantitatively. It may be assumed that visitation patterns of low-income visitors tend toward the more inexpensive methods: day visits, camping, housekeeping, tent cabin rentals..." And yet with minimal socioeconomic data, the Valley Plan's most significant changes are with respect to day visits, camping, and rustic/tent cabin rentals. That is unacceptable.

In comparison, the Plan states "the largest percentage of visitors to Yosemite National Park (26%) have an annual household income greater than \$100,000. The smallest proportion of visitors (5%) have an annual household income of less than \$20,000. By contrast, in the State of California the largest percent of the population (37%) has an annual income below \$20,000. The data illustrate that people from low-income households are largely underrepresented in the population of visitors to Yosemite... This is true on both a statewide and regional basis."

Perhaps that is why Yosemite recently sent representatives to the 16th annual International Travel Expo in Hong Kong to promote visitation to National Parks, including Yosemite within the Asian market. The National

Park Service International Tourism Department chose this international trade show with 450 exhibitors from over 50 countries to reach the Asian tourists and various National Tourism Organizations.

It apparently is all right for the American taxpayer to pay for our national parks; but as our parks transition toward becoming elitist enclaves, unaffordable to the average American, the National Park Service focuses efforts on recruiting visitors from overseas. Something is wrong with this picture.

COMMUNITY IMPACTS OF ILL-CONCEIVED PLANNING PROCESS

In response to the 1980 General Management Plan directive, restaurants, lodging and other services began investing along gateway corridors outside the park, thereby enabling park administrators to avoid further commercial development in Yosemite Valley. Yet nowhere in the General Management Plan or in the core principles that govern the actions of the Park Service is there any acknowledgement of, or concern for, the mutually dependent relationship that has subsequently evolved between the park and the gateway communities as a result of that directive. It is that apparent lack of concern that is particularly troubling to Madera County.

Dependent on the tourist dollar, the fledgling communities along the Highway 41 corridor are all too familiar with the extreme fluctuations that occur based on the park press release, policy or disaster of the day. Any rise or fall in visitation directly impacts business income and job generation, and consequently the economic vitality of the area. Visitation over the past five years has steadily dropped from a high of 4.1 million visitors in 1996 to 3.4 million visitors in 2002 to an NPS projection of 3.1 million for 2004.

The proposed urban-designed mass transit system that threatens to eliminate automobile touring in Yosemite Valley is the biggest gamble yet. Client surveys and park studies already predict busing will degrade the visitor experience—bad news for any economy based on tourism. In fact, from the moment the draft Yosemite Valley Plan was released, local businesses began receiving telephone calls from potential visitors asking if they had to ride a bus to get into the park—and the plan hasn't even been implemented yet. As proposed in this Valley Plan, guests of any lodging facility outside the park are considered “day visitors”—such visitors will directly incur increased economic hardship and inconvenience resulting from mandatory bus travel.

To date, the park has avoided conducting an independent socioeconomic analysis of day visitors to determine what eliminating cars and mandating buses will really cost the gateway communities. In fact, the Yosemite Valley Plan doesn't even recognize gateway communities, instead focusing on the “local communities” of El Portal, Foresta, Wawona, Yosemite Village, and Yosemite West—communities that, for the most part, can only be accessed inside park gates. The tourist dependent towns of Oakhurst, Mariposa, and Groveland are now included as part of a regional economy that the park claims will benefit from an increase in construction jobs as part of the numerous development projects planned inside the park. Such an “analysis” is of little use to the local lodge owner or restaurateur who invested his/her savings in a gateway business trusting that such an effort would help park administrators avoid further commercial development inside the Park.

The small town character of healthy, vibrant gateway communities are the first stop on the way to a pleasurable visit to Yosemite; the warmth and energy of our people, the attractiveness of our businesses, low crime rate, and an environment that mirrors the Park set the stage for a quality visitor experience. It is important that the Park take pride in the gateway communities just as our communities take tremendous pride in the Park. What has made this Yosemite Valley Plan such a flashpoint is that residents recognize the tremendous environmental damage that will occur inside as well as outside the park as it is converted from a nature center to a profit center; dealing with a nonresponsive but highly political and arrogant bureaucracy, that is funded by a never-ending supply of tax dollars, with large corporations poised to displace small local businesses, in a system that offers no recourse other than litigation—this is not the American way.

SUMMARY

As a Committee you have an invaluable opportunity to revisit a decision that was made in haste 6 years ago, in the midst of an emergency; we ask you to exercise courage and integrity as you provide oversight with respect to funds not yet expended in the name of flood recovery. We further request your intervention in a planning process that has gone awry. The “legacy” plans that are before you today will cause irreparable damage to the environment, waste hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars, gamble with the economic vitality of our gateway communities, and ultimately restrict the freedom of Americans to access and enjoy their park.

To restate, we urge you to address the disease rather than dabbling with the symptoms:

--No funding be appropriated for this Yosemite Valley Plan (and YARTS)

- Set aside/rescind this Yosemite Valley Plan (and YARTS)
- All excess flood funding (\$110 million) be returned to the U.S. Treasury
- Redo the Merced River Plan in full compliance with the protective mandate of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, thus creating a solid foundation for all future plans

In closing, we have attached a copy of a letter submitted by the Madera County Board of Supervisors to former Superintendent David Mihalic (6/27/00) for your review. This letter proposes a five-year interim plan during which time the park would focus on completing all necessary research up front rather than during the five years following the record of decision; such information (e.g., inventory/monitoring program, quantified carrying capacity, sociological studies on recreation patterns of low-income and minority populations, socioeconomic analysis of impacts on gateway communities, accessibility plan, etc.) is absolutely critical to an informed planning process. Additionally, this option outlines opportunities to embrace the value-added benefits of involving a diverse public in plan development rather than postponing their participation to the final comment period.