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Testimony of

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before the

Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands

Committee on Resources

U. S. House of Representatives

Oversight hearing on implementation of the Yosemite Valley Plan

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I. INTRODUCTION.

We appreciate having been invited to testify before the Subcommittee.

II. OVERVIEW of the Valley Plan and associated problems.

A. Too much is being done too quickly.

A chaotic situation has been created wherein so much is being attempted so quickly that it seems inevitable that one project will end up conflicting with another, or simply create more problems because other things should have been done first.

As an example, we cite the Lower Yosemite Fall project. Replacement parking for the tour busses ultimately is supposed to be created behind the Village area, but that project is not even being mentioned. In the meantime the tour busses will be shunted from one temporary site to another in the Lower Fall area because their previous parking is being removed. And, continuing a long tradition, more automobile parking is being removed without any improvement in the Valley shuttle bus service to facilitate a transition to less reliance on private autos.

B. Problems with public notification and input.

Adding to the chaos, the Park Service keeps asking for public input, but it is difficult for the public to be aware of what is happening. So it's hardly surprising that they don't have enough information to comment in a rational manner.

The Park Service has been conducting a series of Open Houses on their planning and projects. These offer an immense amount of information and are very useful. But they have almost all been during the week and during the day, so very few people would be able to attend them even if they were aware that the event was occurring. (There will be another one on Wednesday, the day after this hearing, from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.)

The Park Service relies excessively on their web site. Many people simply are not in the habit of getting their information this way. There needs to be more use of mailings to update the public on projects, planning, and comment deadlines.

C. Potential problems because of litigation.

Another reason for slowing the pace of development in the Valley is because litigation over the Merced

River Plan still has not been resolved. It is currently before the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and the likely outcome is not at all clear. The River Plan is supposed to provide a foundation for the Valley Plan (as directed by a District Court judge), and projects now underway might have to be placed on hold if the Circuit Court should find even one problem with the River Plan. Particularly if that one problem happens to be the failure to "address user capacity" as called for by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. That issue alone could pull the underpinnings out from much of what is in the Valley Plan.

D. Simple measures would yield large results.

Much of the development called for by the Valley Plan would not be necessary if simple steps were taken to deal with congestion. There are a few problem road intersections which have been allowed to fester for decades. Why not redesign those intersections instead of turning the whole Valley upside down? Again, inadequate or confusing directional signs has been a problem for decades. Instead of providing better signs, the Park Service points to the confused drivers going around and around and says the solution is to get rid of the drivers and their cars.

E. Day-use reservation system: simple and effective.

And the most obvious solution of all to deal with the congestion which occurs a relatively small portion of the year would be to implement a day-use reservation system with a portion of the slots being available on a first-come-first-served basis. That way those who need to be assured of getting in on a specific date would have that assurance, while those who prefer a more spontaneous approach would probably still get in. Most of the time there is simply not a problem of too many people or too many cars.

There is much anecdotal evidence that many people don't come because they think it is crowded, or they won't be able to get in, or they won't be able to drive their car in. A reservation would ensure their getting in, and would steer them away from the times that do tend to be crowded. We suspect that a reasonably implemented day-use reservation system would actually reverse the continuing decline in annual visitation, as well as improve the quality of the visitor's experience.

We hasten to point out that the Valley Plan actually moved AWAY from the concept of a day-use reservation system. The idea was implied in the 1980 General Management Plan, but that seminal beginning was deleted by amendment through the Valley Plan process. It is one of the reasons that we are less than enthusiastic about the Valley Plan.

This action of the Valley Plan was actually in contravention of the Park Service's own regulations, which direct that every unit of the National Park System address the carrying capacity issue. This requirement was brought out in the General Accounting Office's November 15, 2002 report on transportation projects in the National Park System ("National Park Service: Opportunities to Improve the Administration of the Alternative Transportation Program").

III. OTHER TRANSPORTATION ISSUES in addition to those mentioned above.

A. South Side Drive widening and North Side Drive closure.

While it is not on the table yet, we dread the day that the Park Service starts widening South Side Drive in anticipation of closing North Side Drive. At present, South Side Drive (as well as North Side Drive) provides two lanes of one-way traffic, making for the safe and pleasant movement of movement of different types of vehicles in one direction. Faster and slower...autos, busses and bicycles...all are accommodated smoothly.

In order to move traffic as well if it were two-way, as called for in the Valley Plan, four lanes would be required. Huge numbers of trees would have to be removed, and an ugly swath of asphalt inviting high speeds would take their place. The very idea is an abomination which never should have found its way onto paper. To keep it at two lanes (one in each direction) would result in gross traffic congestion, a high accident rate, and an unpleasant visitor experience.

And all this because someone thought it would be a good idea to close North Side Drive to traffic. JUST LEAVE THINGS ALONE! This is a prime example of failure to anticipate that "restoration" of North Side Drive would inevitably result in gross destruction of natural values and quality of the visitor experience on South Side Drive.

B. Realignment of North Side Drive in vicinity of Yosemite Lodge.

Again, why can't it just be left alone? Because the Lower Fall project has already committed the Park Service to another project which doesn't make sense. The four-way problem intersection could easily have been fixed without a massive realignment of North Side Drive, or moving overnight lodging closer to the rockfall zone. The entire Lower Fall, Lodge redevelopment, and North Side Drive realignment complex of projects is an example of planning run amuck. A massive urban redevelopment project, without regard for the fact that this is a national park.

C. Segment "D" of the El Portal road (Highway 120/140 junction to Pohono Bridge).

While it is not on the table yet, and the environmental reviews have not been started, it is quite clear that the Park Service has every intention of raising this segment of road to the same standard as the newly completed section. And this is in spite of the fact that the gradients and curves that provided the rationale for the other construction do not exist on Segment "D". Although portions of the road require stabilization because of flood damage, this could be accomplished without the massive impacts to the landscape that would be required if the road were reconstructed to the same standard as that already done. Rather than a blind insistence on uniform widths just for the sake of uniformity, we ask that the road not be rebuilt except as necessary for safety.

D. YARTS.

Because there continues to be misunderstanding as to the Sierra Club's attitude toward YARTS, we wish to make it clear that we support efforts, including those by organizations such as YARTS, to address regional transportation issues which affect Yosemite provided those efforts advance the goals of the 1980 General Management Plan. Those goals include reduction of traffic congestion, reduction of overcrowding, and promotion of visitor enjoyment.

We should also add that we strongly urge that transportation systems be implemented in such a way as to make progress toward cleaner air.

E. Tour (excursion) busses.

One of the biggest deficiencies in the Valley Plan is its failure to address the ever-increasing demand for access to the Valley by tour busses. The Plan makes much of the problems which are perceived to be caused by autos, with Draconian restrictions on their use. Yet it simply ignores the potentially far worse problem which will be caused by unlimited numbers of highly polluting and noisy tour busses.

It is our understanding that the Park Service has the authority to regulate tour bus access to the Park, and could require that the busses meet specific emission standards as a condition of entry. If the Park Service does not have that authority, it seems that enabling legislation would be appropriate. If they already have the authority, it seems that they need to be encouraged to move in that direction.

And, to the extent that tour busses are carrying day-use visitors, our comments above regarding the wisdom of a day-use reservation system would apply to tour busses also.

F. Fuel cells.

We appreciate Mr. Radanovich's interest in seeking cleaner air for Yosemite, and we support a fuel cell project provided the goal is to make progress toward cleaner air in Yosemite. Apparently the project would not necessarily be for a bus; if it is for a stationary facility, we suggest Crane Flat because the electricity supplied there now is from a diesel generator.

G. Valley shuttle busses.

We would like to see the present fleet of old and polluting diesel busses replaced with vehicles which would match former Western Regional Director John Reynolds' vision of "the cleanest busses in the world", as articulated by him before this Subcommittee on March 27, 2001.

We are not convinced that a diesel powered electric hybrid bus would meet that vision. We would like to see a comparison of the alternatives, including propane powered electric hybrid, gasoline powered electric hybrid, and straight propane powered. If emissions data shows that diesel powered hybrids would be the cleanest and otherwise suitable, we could support that. But diesels have such a bad reputation that it seems

hard to believe they would prove to be the cleanest just because they are put into a hybrid application. It seems as though the others would also be cleaner in the hybrid application, still leaving diesel at a relative disadvantage. Like I said, we would like an opportunity to review the comparative data, but have been having some difficulty getting the information.

H. Expansion of the Valley Shuttle Routes.

It would seem that this is one of the less controversial actions called for in the Valley Plan, and has the potential for reducing congestion and facilitating visitor access. Yet we see no indication that the Park Service has any plans for taking it up in the foreseeable future. We believe they have indicated that they would first have to build a series of stops complete with rest rooms, so they are looking upon it as a massive undertaking.

It seems self-evident that people drive all around the Valley now, stopping and getting out of their cars, at countless places where there are no rest rooms. We see no reason why public transportation could not be provided on the same basis.

I. Day-use parking.

As alluded to above, we find it highly inappropriate for the Park Service to continue to remove day-use parking without first providing suitable alternatives to the use of the private auto. Much of the congestion which actually occurs is the result of removal of parking, which has been ongoing for at least the last twenty years. We are usually in favor of removing asphalt, but not if it is simply going to get laid down somewhere else (as called for in the Valley Plan), and not if it results in degradation of the visitor experience (as called for in the Valley Plan)

IV. CAMPGROUNDS.

We support the decision in the 2000 Yosemite Valley Plan to restore the Upper and Lower River Campground sites to natural conditions. We also support the expansion of additional camping opportunities outside Yosemite Valley as suggested by recent Park studies. In particular, we support the 1980 General Management Plan provision that there be "in kind" replacement of camping opportunities to compensate for those which are removed from Yosemite Valley.

We note that there has been a continuing long-term process of reducing camping opportunities throughout the Park. It appears to be part of the pattern of phasing out lower-cost accommodations, and putting in higher cost accommodations, which has manifested itself so clearly in the Yosemite Valley Plan. Recognizing that it is difficult to find suitable locations for new camping opportunities in the Valley, we feel there is all the more reason to make every effort to find appropriate locations as near as possible outside the Valley.

Another way of compensating for the loss of campgrounds within the Valley would be to provide adequate shuttle service into the Valley from outlying campgrounds.

V. CONCLUSION.

We thank you for the opportunity of testifying.