

**United States Senate
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks**

**The Impacts of Overcrowding in Our National Parks on Park Resources and Visitor Experiences,
and to Consider Strategic Approaches to Visitor Use Management**

July 28, 2021

**Kevin O. Gartland
Executive Director, Whitefish, MT Chamber of Commerce**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and subcommittee members, and thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the issue of national park overcrowding, the effect it is having on park resources and visitor experiences, and what – if anything – is to be done about it.

Whitefish is a mountain resort town located about 25 miles west of the entrance to Glacier National Park. Our organization represents about 500 small businesses in the “gateway” communities of West Glacier, Coram, Hungry Horse, Columbia Falls and Whitefish ... and as we are primarily a business organization, let me begin by telling you that business is booming.

If anything, it’s too good – there aren’t enough workers to fill the jobs available, so business owners are leaving money on the table. “Limited operations” are the order of the day, with most everyone in the hospitality industry – from restaurants, bars and hotels to major attractions like Whitefish Mountain Resort – running at about 75-80 percent capacity.

Despite that, it’s safe to say that 2021 will be the busiest ever for tourism in our region, and the busiest ever for Glacier National Park. That’s nothing new; visitation to Glacier has set a new “all-time” record nearly every year for the last five years. In the world of business, that’s a very good thing ... you simply gear-up production to meet the increased demand, and everybody’s happy. Unfortunately, in managing natural resources – in this case, a national park – it’s not just the law of supply and demand that applies. There are also a myriad of other issues to consider, including the quality of the visitor experience and the “carrying capacity” of the park itself.

In an effort to manage overcrowding and maintain a quality visitor experience, Glacier National Park this year instituted a “Ticketed Entry Reservation System” for the most popular area of the park – the Going-to-the-Sun Road corridor. Oddly enough, it’s the system itself that has been the worst part of the visitor experience in Glacier this summer ... at least for those who’ve been unable to get a \$2 ticket.

The fact that the new reservation system was rolled out late in the game – just months before the summer crush -- caused confusion and frustration not only among visitors attempting to purchase the tickets, but for employees of local businesses – and Visitor Info Centers – who have literally been getting “hammered” by tourists who’ve travelled thousands of miles and spent tens of thousands of dollars,

only to have their vacation ruined because they can't get their hands on a \$2 ticket to see Glacier. One local worker put it this way: "I feel more like a therapist than I do a marketing director."

In terms of Visitor Experience, I believe you really have to consider the experience of at least three different types of customers: visitors who were able to get a ticket; visitors who weren't; and the residents of gateway communities who live and work in this area so they can enjoy the park on a regular basis.

By all accounts, the ticketed entry system has relieved a bit of the overcrowding we've seen in the last few years, and that's a plus for those able to get into the park. While it is still extremely difficult to find parking space at the major tourist attractions and trailheads, it is possible to find pullouts and places to get out of your vehicle, have a picnic lunch, take some photos and enjoy the scenery.

It's also a given that the "Glacier Experience" is far different today than it was 10-15 years ago. These days it's tough to get off the beaten path. The most popular trails are always crowded, with the trail to Avalanche Lake often described as a "pack train of people" making its way up-and-down the mountain. And simply getting to the trailhead can be a harrowing experience. Once local guide told me – only half-jokingly – that "it's like the Indy 500 on Going-to-the-Sun Road at 6 a.m.," as visitors race to get a parking spot before they're all taken.

Even so, the majority of folks who are able to gain entry to the park are having a good experience ... far better than those who've been unable to maneuver the system and get that golden \$2 ticket. At the Whitefish Visitor Center, we have spent the last four months trying to explain the Ticketed Entry System to folks trying to plan – or salvage – their summer vacations. It is the single most difficult issue we've ever had to help people deal with.

The third group of "customers" whose experience is important to the conversation are the locals ... the people who live and work in the area, both in and out of the tourist trade. These local residents – the annual pass holders who visit the park regularly with family and friends – feel that they've been "left out" of the process ... left to compete with the 3 million visitors who're vying to get their hands on a limited number of daily passes.

But even with all that said, the overall consensus of the business community is that – while the system definitely needs tweaking -- it is leading to a better experience for the visiting public.

In terms of alternatives to ticketed entry, there simply aren't that many.

Returning to "unrestricted" access during the peak summer season simply isn't an option. Business owners do not want to return to 2019 and 2020, when the park reached "peak capacity" on dozens of occasions, and the west gate was shut down entirely for hours at a time. Traffic waiting to enter the park was backed-up for nearly two miles, clear through the community of West Glacier and onto State Highway 2. That killed business, as the roadway became a parking lot for the Park and "paying customers" couldn't get to local businesses.

Public transit is another possible option to ease the number of private vehicles travelling on the Sun Road Corridor. With enough funding and infrastructure (new parking lots, energy-efficient vehicles, manpower, etc.) transit could take vehicles off the road, but would do little to address the core problem. Because private automobile traffic isn't the real problem ... overcrowding is.

Make no mistake -- business owners are in it to make a profit. But residents of northwestern Montana are united in their love for Glacier National Park. They feel a strong sense of ownership and stewardship, and believe that the Park is here to be protected, enjoyed and preserved, not exploited. The phrase you hear quite often in these parts is that we're "loving the Park to death."

The law of supply and demand doesn't apply here. The demand is there ... but we can't just go out and build more Glacier. As has always been the case, the National Park Service must balance the desires of the public to visit with the carrying capacity of the Park and the quality of the visitor experience.

In a situation like ours where the resource is limited but demand is insatiable, one strategy for managing visitor use is to actively promote recreational activities and attractions located outside the national park boundaries. GNP Superintendent Jeff Mow has been engaged with the local business community for several years in an effort to do exactly that, but is limited by departmental policies and restrictions.

Establishment of a full-service Visitor Information Center in West Glacier – outside the boundaries of the Park – would assist not only in educating visitors about the Glacier Experience and how to access it, but also about recreational opportunities, events and attractions in our gateway communities. The Province of Alberta has a multi-million dollar Visitor Center in West Glacier to try and lure tourists across the border; we should have something similar to help visitors more fully enjoy and experience the Glacier region, and take some pressure off the Park itself.

In closing, I would reiterate the opinion expressed by 90-percent of the business owners I've talked to in the last week ... that the Ticketed Entry Reservation System isn't perfect. It needs some serious tweaking, and we need to look more strategically at how tickets are allocated and dispersed. But it's a good first step toward dealing with a very difficult problem, and we urge the Park Service – and Glacier National Park, in particular – to stay the course.