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March 2018

This letter is an attempt to answer the majority of the comments and questions that have come in over the course of the winter. While I am certain it is not an exhaustive list, hopefully it will give you better insight into the complexities of the Mount Spokane Nordic Program and answer many of the questions and concerns that have been raised. We have received numerous positive comments from the community and also heard vocal frustrations about the program this year. Hopefully this letter will provide some answers. If you have further comments and/or questions, please feel free to reach out to me by email at mount.spokane@parks.wa.gov or by phone at 509-465-5064.

Winter Recreation Program

Mount Spokane is a dedicated Sno-Park from December 1 through March 31. A seasonal Sno-Park permit is \$40 per vehicle and a seasonal special groomed sticker is an extra \$40 per vehicle for use of the Nordic trails. The money does not stay in the park where it is collected. These permits are valid throughout the state at any designated Sno-Park and the funds contribute to the overall success of winter recreation across the state. As a designated Sno-Park, Mount Spokane seeks funding from the Winter Recreation Program in order to run the winter operation. We compete for grants against such things as other personnel for other Sno-Parks, avalanche programs, facilities and equipment requests. We use funding to pay for plowing of the Selkirk Lodge parking lot, snowmobile and snowshoe parking lots, fuel for the grooming machines and plowing of lots, maintenance of the grooming machines, the two 4-month grooming positions (one motorized and one non-motorized), and for education and enforcement of the Winter Recreation Program. The funding is complex, but basically: Winter Recreation money comes from the Winter Recreation Advisory Committee (WRAC) and the Snow Mobile Advisory Committee (SMAC). Each committee provides the funding for its interests – the WRAC receives its funding from the sale of Sno-Park permits and of special groomed stickers which pay for services such as snow removal, signage, and grooming. The SMAC receives its funding from snowmobile tabs, registrations, and a legislatively mandated fuel tax refund and contributes to the services for snow removal, sanitation, education and enforcement, and snowmobile trail grooming.

Nordic Area Grooming Position

As stated above, the Nordic area grooming position is paid for solely from funds collected by the Sno-Park permit and special groomed sticker required at the Nordic area. The position is funded from December 1 through March 31. It is a difficult position to fill due to the short time frame, the hours of work (10 p.m. to 6:30 a.m., not to mention this position works Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, New Year's Eve and New Year's Day - about 11 days straight, when typically their family is at home), the difficult work conditions (cold temperatures, snow, wind, and fog – experiencing vertigo is often a comment from groomer operators), and applicable experience (we either get people who know snow and have little equipment experience or vice versa), and we don't have many applicants from which to choose in general. We also have to meet all union requirements for hiring and working conditions. Last year you had someone grooming that had spent three years in the seat and had also had experience in the park during the off season – that is a perfect situation and one we would like to replicate. We asked that groomer back and he declined. As I said, it is a difficult position. We have had unexpected turnover this year which has created three different learning curves for our team. Why did they leave? A variety of reasons that essentially boil down to being a good fit. Any agency or private contractor will tell you that high competence with heavy equipment (regardless of the machinery) is a definitive skill – you either have a knack for it or you don't. Anyone can actually learn the controls of how to operate the machine (even I went out and groomed for a few hours one night), however to truly understand what the machine needs to create the best product possible is something that is learned over time. Then add in the snow. It is different every night based on amount, temperature, humidity levels, trees, wind, weather conditions the week before and that day, and the weather while you groom. Then it starts to snow at 4 a.m. and covers everything that you just did. Then add in the terrain – Mount Spokane differs from most ski areas in that the trails are undulating, curvy, heavily treed, with many streams and there is often no room for error. Then add in the expectations of a perfect product. That expectation is one that is very rare and challenging to accomplish under all of the indicated circumstances. Maneuvering a very large, very cumbersome, and very delicate piece of machinery through this terrain in ever changing conditions with incredibly high expectations is stressful. When you are a temporary employee working in these conditions, the stress gets to you very easily. We are a recreation program and want to offer the best recreation experience that we can – and I think we do a good job of meeting the needs of the public. This year we have had some issues in consistently achieving that goal and are actively working on corrections and improvements.

***Solutions:** We are making every effort to hire someone in this position who will return for at least a few years. This will always be a challenge that we have to work through. In the meantime, we are looking at various ways to make things easier for a new operator – a desk manual will be developed for the groomer operator. This manual will include information on specific snow conditions, basic equipment expectations and diagrams, known eccentricities of the terrain, known eccentricities of the equipment, what to look for and listen for to stop a problem before it happens, detailed trail maps (and better trail signage - it looks different at 2 a.m.), and other items that we will work with the Grooming Advisory Committee on. We will also develop a better onboarding program from the beginning to establish a level of comfort for the operator with the machine, the operation, and the park. We will conduct our interviews earlier in the season and have someone on board on December 1 next year, when funding starts for the position.*

Training

We had Prinoth, the grooming machine manufacturer, come out four times this season - twice for each new groomer. They walked through the machinery in detail and rode with them on the trails to provide hands-on training. This is the most training our groomers have ever had. We also had a groomer go to the Methow to ride with their groomers and ride with the Alpine groomers. There is very little training for groomers. The closest training is at Yellowstone, MT and takes place in October. The people we hire for our seasonal position are still at their regular jobs in October, they are not yet hired by the state, and we would not pay for them to go to training (nor does the State often approve out of state training). Training is a conundrum. We continue to work internally and with Prinoth to solve this issue. The Winter Recreation Program is looking into a possible one to two day workshop with experienced personnel that could provide basic pre-grooming checks, post-grooming checks, and other mechanical issues to be aware of, to look and to listen for. The details of this potential training have not been worked out, however, staff are optimistic that this training will happen in late Fall of 2018.

BR 350: The “Big Groomer”

The Prinoth groomer is a five year old grooming machine that was purchased by the Winter Recreation Program for use at the Mount Spokane State Park Cross-Country Ski Area. It is owned by the Winter Recreation Program, not Mount Spokane, and funding for repairs comes from the Winter Recreation Program. This year, a significant amount of money has been put into the BR 350. Why? A variety of reasons. While these grooming machines are large pieces of heavy equipment, they are also extremely finicky and delicate. The BR 350 had a problem that we were unaware of - the micro-processor for the steering component had gone bad - which caused difficulty in maneuvering the machine. The difficulty in steering created quite a few issues throughout the beginning of the winter. Because we had a new operator, it was hard to know if it was the machine or the person. Then we changed operators, and again, did not know what the issue was until it resulted in a problem. The potentiometers needed to be adjusted (which also created some of the troughs from ice balls and problems turning on corners and in the junctions). The steering, along with some challenge grooming conditions (warmer temperatures and softer snow) and an operator with limited experience, caused the machine to slide off a trail, which pushed the tiller into the snow bank and resulted in serious damage to the tiller - the most important and finicky part of the groomer. When purchased, the BR 350 came with a 14 foot tiller – which is too wide for the trails at Mount Spokane – so the tiller was cut down to 12 feet and other components were retrofitted to make this work on the machine. What this means however, is that when something breaks on the BR 350, it is not possible for a stock part to be taken out of inventory and put on the machine. The part has to be custom ordered to work on the machine. This takes time. The representative from Prinoth works throughout the entire west coast and travels non-stop during the winter. He has been extremely good to us this year and very responsive to our needs – both maintenance and training – however he has many other clients he needs to serve. The big groomer is complex to maintain – like most pieces of heavy equipment these days – and requires a high level of expertise in order to fix issues. We cannot handle more than basic maintenance at the park level. This is true for all of our newer equipment at State Parks. Much like your personal car – due to technology, all but basic maintenance needs to be done at a shop, and sometimes even an oil change is not an at home task anymore.

Solutions: *Have a back-up tiller for the BR 350, finish the project to widen the trails (many of them are still tight at best even for the 12 foot tiller), an earlier inspection time frame for the machine, development of a robust operator check list for day-to-day and periodic maintenance needs, not using it during soft snow or overly icy conditions, and just a rough year under our belts helps. Experience in this program is priceless.*

BR 180: The “Small Groomer”

The BR 180 has been around for a few years. It is used as a back-up groomer for the mountain in case something happens to the BR 350. The BR 180 has not been used very much, if at all, since the purchase of the BR 350. The BR 350 creates a superior product, so this makes total sense. The BR 180 has also been sitting outside over the last few years as there is not much room in the storage shed for all of our equipment. Both of these factors have contributed to a variety of degradation to the BR 180. When you take out a piece of equipment to use that has been sitting for a long time, all of the problems quickly become very apparent. Luckily, there have been no major issues with the BR 180 and everything thus far has been managed by park staff. It has created problems with grooming – the track setter wasn’t lying correctly and made divots and trenches before it completely broke off, the rubber part of the tracks is worn, cracked, and tearing in places and has had to be patched, brackets have come loose in the hydraulic lines and sheared off while in operation, and the steering mechanism is jumpy and difficult to manage. While these are not major problems, they have serious consequences to the comfort and safety of the groomer operator and all impact the grooming product in one way or another – whether by lack of time to actually groom instead of troubleshooting or by digging trenches throughout the trail or creating wiggly tracks.

Solutions: *We have created space this year in the storage shed so that the BR 180 is kept out of the worst weather conditions. This creates a difficult space issue, but is manageable. The BR 180 will also be gone over with a fine tooth comb and the rubber element of the tracks will be replaced. We have a good idea of what the BR 180 needs and will have the time this summer to pamper it and have it ready to go. The BR 180 will also be used more frequently on the trails in order to keep it in good working condition. Heavy equipment isn’t designed to just sit and we will make certain that this doesn’t happen. Like the BR 350, a robust check sheet will be made for the BR 180 so that it is getting regular maintenance and systems checks.*

BR 350 GPS

For some reason the GPS was spotty on the BR 350 throughout the winter, regardless of conditions and operator. It is also not transferable between grooming machines as it is hardwired into the BR 350. Therefore, GPS tracking for completed trails was poor this year. It was also lost in the hustle to fix all the other problems we were encountering.

Solutions: *Thankfully, this is an easy fix by either purchasing more flexible equipment or equipping both machines. There should be vast improvement in this area for next season.*

Privatization

A few people have commented on the idea of privatizing the area, much like the alpine concessionaire that we have, or an outside party taking over the grooming operation. A decision such as this is outside of

the hands of Park management and would require the involvement of multiple entities. The area is primarily State Park land with an easement on some Inland Empire Paper land that is paid for out of the Winter Recreation budget. Any proposals for privatization or other significant changes to the Nordic ski area would have to be presented to State Parks and Inland Empire Paper. This proposal would have to meet and support the mission of Washington State Parks which includes providing recreation opportunities to all Washingtonians as well as stewarding the land that we manage. Any decisions that would affect price, accessibility, or cultural or natural resources would be made by the Commission. The Winter Recreation Program would also be included in this review. This program is founded and bound by legislative decisions. Any adjustment to Mount Spokane State Park's participation in the Winter Recreation Program would heavily involve the Program, the Commission and potentially the Legislature due to the rules and laws that govern the program. As a state agency, State Parks adheres to the rules and regulations of the Washington Federation of State Employees; therefore the Union would also be involved in this process. And, of course, the process would be subject to public meetings and would include public comment from all interested groups and individuals. These are a few things that come to the top of my head and would require time, energy, commitment, and an indeterminate amount of money. In the meantime, I will make a commitment to you that the staff at Mount Spokane will be spending some time and energy on solving some of the problems that we have encountered this season.

Communication

While communication was not terrible this year, it is certainly an area that needs great improvement. This is also pretty typical in any business where there has been significant turnover. There are four new people in key positions at Mount Spokane – and this does not include the groomer operators – and it has created a situation where we are always reactive instead of proactive. Not ideal. I think we made some headway over the season by trial by fire, but will take a good look at things so we have better and clearer communication channels for next season. Your comments and feedback have been very helpful tools for us over the winter.

***Solutions:** Communication between the park and the Spokane Nordic Grooming Advisory Committee definitely improved over the season, however still needs some fine tuning. The Grooming Advisory Committee is a very important entity and I am grateful for their presence and assistance. I look forward to working closely with them throughout the year. The park also asks that users communicate through the Grooming Advisory Committee as well. If you have concerns or comments regarding the grooming, please go to the Grooming Advisory Committee. Please do not talk to the groomer operator. When you see them in the morning, they have just finished a very difficult job and are tired. Negative comments can turn personal very easily. It is not that we do not want your feedback – on the contrary, it is very important to us. However, there is an appropriate mechanism to use for comment – inform either the park or the Grooming Advisory Committee and we will address your issue. Sometimes a simple “Thank you” to the groomer operator can change their day.*

The problems with the GPS have been discussed and will be addressed over the summer – a critical communication tool for all of us. The updates to the State Parks grooming hotline has had difficulties as well – again, something that we can easily address over the summer. The Winter Recreation Program has leased AtlasTrax GPS units which have been installed on both groomers. They are optimistic that by next season these units will be interactive with the trail maps.

In Conclusion

I realize that this was not an ideal year. We had significant problems from the beginning in both grooming and the road maintenance equipment and never really got our feet under us. And as this is such a short use season, these problems are exacerbated to a significant degree. I am appreciative of your comments and concerns, it is a testament to the public's engagement with Mount Spokane. My staff and I take all of your comments seriously and will work diligently over the less snowy part of the year in order to make improvements to your winter recreation experience. As I said earlier, experience in this program is priceless. Experience on the mountain is priceless too. We have learned a great deal from this winter and look forward to next year. Thank you for your appreciation of Mount Spokane State Park.

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