

September 3, 2009

Re: Denali Properties, LLC application for easement on Sugarloaf Mountain

Dear Ms. Leinberger,

On behalf of the Board and more than 300 members of the Denali Citizens Council, I am pleased to submit comments to the State of Alaska regarding the request of Denali Properties LLC for an easement on Sugarloaf Mountain. DCC, founded in Cantwell in 1974, is truly a grassroots organization, focused on the unique and compelling public policy issues of Denali National Park and its gateway communities. Many of our members are local employees and residents and have an ongoing interest in activities such as this.

According to the notice on your website, the request is for the following:

*Denali Properties submitted an easement application to create a trail and refreshment area northeast of Grand Denali Lodge on state land. The trail would be designated private non-exclusive. This would allow other users, but give Denali Properties the ability to manage the trail. While the trail would be on public land, access to the trail would only be possible from private land owned by Denali Properties which is accessed by a private non-exclusive easement from the Parks Highway. Denali Properties applied for an easement approximately 10,560' in length and 60' in width, encompassing approximately 14.5 acres. The trail would originate from the northeast corner of Grand Denali Lodge and travel northeast on a ridge between Kingfisher and Junco Creeks toward a lower southwest summit of Sugar Loaf Mountain at about 4500'. The proposed plan is to construct a graveled trail that would be used from spring through fall and would accommodate foot traffic and minimal motorized traffic for garbage collection. At the end of the trail there would be a viewing area with temporary structures that would serve as a visitor station and a concession stand. The temporary structure would be 18' x 12'. There would be a cleared and graveled circular area that would have interpretive signs and benches. This area would be approximately 40' x 40'.*

This permit request occurs within the context of existing state policy for the Nenana Canyon and Parks Highway Corridor. The state must follow the policies itemized below when considering the granting of any access.

- **Management policies for this area stress its statewide recreational values and the importance of keeping public lands here in a natural condition.**

The Tanana Basin Area Plan has designated the Nenana River Corridor, an area paralleling the Nenana River in this area, as eligible for State Recreation River status. The management subunits in the area of the permit application (4R3 and 4C2) have as their primary, state mandated purpose **wildlife habitat** and **public recreation**. The importance of public use of these resources is emphasized in the TBAP. The plan states (p. 3-153) “The primary management intent for each subunit within this management unit (4R) is to maintain its current character and to preserve foreground scenery and opportunities for recreation.” And on p. 3-128, “The Alaska Range, Yanert Valley, Panorama Mountain and the Nenana Canyon have high recreation values for hiking, skiing, dog mushing and kayaking. These areas (4C2) should remain in a natural condition for maximum enjoyment of their recreational values.”

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Nancy Bale  
Anne Beaulaurier  
Jean Balay  
Cass Ray

Joan Frankevich  
Nan Eagleson  
Jared Zimmerman

Julia Potter, Community Organizer

- **The Parks Highway Visioning document (2006) lists protection of the viewshed as a primary value for public lands adjacent to the Parks Highway Corridor.**  
 “Recreation and tourism are extremely important in this corridor and the world-class scenic value is a valuable asset... The segment of the highway from the Chulitna River to Healy is designated a State Scenic Byway because of the incredible vistas of the Alaska Range and the rugged wildlands... Viewsheds need land use planning and inter-governmental coordination to provide protection... The National Parks Service is concerned about impacts of development on scenic vistas around Denali National Park. This is primarily development that is out of sync with its contextual surroundings, such as the new hotels in Nenana Canyon or possible strip development along the highway in the Trapper Creek area ancillary to potential future development discussed in the *Denali National Park and Preserve: South Side Development Concept Plan*.” Pg. 5-9 and 5-10, *Parks Highway Visioning Document*, 2006
- **The TBAP gives a high priority to preservation of public access.**  
 p. 2-14, under Goals, “Improve or maintain public access to areas with significant public resource values by retaining access sites and corridors in public ownership.”

**In consideration of existing state policy and in the interests of the State of Alaska and of local citizens, we urge you to deny this permit application. Below are our concerns:**

**1. Public access to this proposed trail is limited and could be cut off at the whim of a private landowner.**

According to the permit, the trail would be designated “private, non-exclusive.” This confusing term means, according to the permit, that the trail would “allow other users, but give Denali Properties the ability to manage the trail.” Since access to the trailhead would be across private land, Denali Properties would, if granted this permit, have the ability to deny access to a state trail. Such a situation creates a bad precedent, and goes against state policy for maintaining public access to resources in this area. Even without denial of access, the trailhead is not likely to be well marked or even identified where the road meets the Parks Highway. This permit appears to be an attempt on the part of Denali Properties to gain special access for their private guests to public lands.

**2. The 60’ trail easement is too wide and little justification for that width is given.**

This request is being made for a hiking trail only, since ATV access is limited to garbage collection. Does Denali Properties require 60 feet for a foot trail? Other trails in the area are not this wide. The multipurpose trail between Nenana Canyon and the park was built ten feet wide and other built trails in the park average approximately 2-3 feet wide. There need be no easement for utilities, to prevent encroachment, or for future road building. Little other justification is given for that width of trail, which, given the distance it will travel, will commit acres of state land to a use from which it may never recover. More compelling justification for the 60’ easement must be given, although we can think of little justification for this wide a trail. It would be a road and would look like a road.

**3. The slope of the trail is too steep.**

The trail appears to climb up a ridge behind the Grande Denali, with no switchbacks in either sketch. There are areas where contours are quite steep. Best practices for trail building, according to the NPS booklet, “Standards for Trail Construction” (available as a pdf upon request) dictate a slope of 10 % to minimize erosion and increase hiker safety, and ideally a slope of less than 7%. The permittee must prove that the trail

design as stipulated will maintain a safe slope angle, and one that will minimize erosion. Graveling the trail will do little to increase safety and minimize erosion.

**4. The trail as described will impinge upon the viewshed from nearby lodges, the Alaska Railroad, the Parks Highway and Denali National Park.**

A concession stand on a prominent shoulder of the mountain could be a terrible eyesore, and would be seen by thousands of visitors every day, from Denali National Park's entrance area, the Park's Highway, and Alaska Railroad. If promoted as a tourist attraction, developers would have an interest in making the site as visible as possible. Large obtrusive signs and architecture obscures the natural beauty of the Nenana Canyon have created the "glitter gulch" commercial district. Under no circumstances should this type of development be allowed to sprawl further up the mountainside.

**5. It is not in the public's interest to establish commercial uses at the terminus of the trail. Benches possibly, a small comfort station possibly or interpretive signage.**

It is not in the public interest to provide concession type items at the top of a trail. They can be provided at the bottom. People would climb that trail for the view. They would be able to bring with them any snacks or other items in a day pack. The state will set an unhelpful precedent to allow commercial activities in an area that has been mandated to remain in its natural condition. Commercial activities add nothing to this recreational experience.

**6. The use of ATVs for any part of this operation is extremely problematic.**

Although the permit asks only for use of ATVs for "garbage collection," it is not difficult to predict a slippery slope of increased use not specified in the permit. Observing the use of ATVs on that mountain from the road below can send an erroneous message that their use for recreation is legal and encouraged. Motorized vehicles could quickly destroy the alpine environment near the top of the mountain. This area is important sheep habitat, and the impact this project could have on their behavior should be fully considered.

**7. We are not opposed to a trail with guaranteed public access, built according to best practices and with no motorized use.**

Any trail developed should be developed as a hiking trail only. A route that reduces grades will make the trail more accessible and more enjoyable to all hikers. Widening a trail up the ridgeline doesn't do anything to improve this. A sustainably designed trail will utilize switchbacks and climbing turns to gain elevation across the hillside; a 60' wide easement is enough room to develop a gravel road, but it does not allow room for sustainable design techniques. Instead, an appropriate trail should be developed, if any. Still, however, the problem of public access, if the trail is built in this location.

**8. Some valuable information is missing from this application.**

What is the capacity of the Grande Denali lodge? How much use of the trail is expected? What plans are in place for safety on such a steep trail, where liability could devolve to the state? How will the proposed concession stand be set up, since the only planned ATV use would be garbage collection? How will gravel be applied? Questions about access to this trail need to be addressed in the application. Any trail developed in this area should be available for public use. Under no circumstances should fees have to be paid to access state land. If the trailhead is to be the Grande Denali Lodge, will public parking be provided? This question is more important if motorized use is considered. Any ATV use on this trail would be destructive, but these effects would be exponential if ATV tour companies would lead groups up the mountain.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments. Please feel free to contact me at the phone number below with any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nancy Bale". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Nancy Bale  
President, Denali Citizens Council  
907-277-3825