

Denali Citizens Council



*Advocating for Denali's Wilderness, Wildlife and Way of life.*

August 4, 2014

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Superintendent, Denali National Park  
PO Box 9  
Denali National Park, Alaska 99755

**Re: NPS Seeking Input on Scenic Overlook Pullout on Government Hill**

Dear Superintendent Striker,

On behalf of the board and over 300 members of Denali Citizens Council, thank you for the opportunity to offer our suggestions regarding the proposal to build a pullout on Government Hill.

In a recent survey of our members, issues in Denali, specifically protecting Denali's backcountry experience and the Park Road corridor, ranked in their top priorities.

We agree that safety is a number one priority for visitors and that appreciation of Denali is of utmost importance. We want to offer several possible alternatives for the NPS to consider in the scoping process for a turnout on Government Hill. We appreciate the planning effort to improve the experience for visitors who might appreciate this addition, and feel strongly that any additional infrastructure in the front country be done with minimal impacts to both park resources (such as viewshed) and to visitors who seek more of a wilderness experience.

Despite Government Hill lying within the Front Country Developed Area, we believe that only alternatives with the smallest possible footprint necessary to achieve the goal of the project should be considered. Though the project might be "beneficial" to the visitor experience, through provision of increased opportunities for scenic viewing, the impact to the viewshed from other points within the park must also be considered as potentially damaging both to resources and to the visitor experience because of the location. We hope that any future Environmental Assessment consider what the impact to viewshed will be from other areas of the Park's front country, especially the Triple Lakes Trail. As the Triple Lakes Trail gains in popularity and is touted as a Wilderness Trail, consider the impact on the view and wilderness experience of those visitors (many of whom already see the landscape blighted by the increased footprint of the Maintenance and Autoshop complex).

We are also opposed to encouraging visitors to consider and have their experience in Denali be a typical drive through a national park where everything is accessible by vehicle. We want them to get out and experience it fully, and to the greatest extent possible. Encouraging walking, even a short distance, instead of a drive-thru scenic view, should be one of the goals for this project. This can easily be accomplished by

*Board of Directors*

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providing an overlook area that is divided in some way from the parking area with an ADA accessible walkway between the two.

We feel that both goals of providing a safe experience for visitors to view the landscape from Government Hill and protecting the viewshed from other points in the park can be accomplished. We do not feel that this area is in need of interpretive signage.

As a question, is this project being proposed because there has been safety concerns voiced, close calls, or actual accidents? If so, we suggest that the speed limit be lowered to 25 mph through this section, extending it all the way from the crossing at the railroad tracks to west of Headquarters. A lower speed could decrease possible future problems. This could be done regardless of any of the options below. Signs identifying that there is scenic overlook parking from both approaches along the Park Road and at any designated parking areas could also help to improve safety by decreasing the congestion in moving lanes of traffic. An increase in patrolling along this section of road by Law Enforcement Rangers during the peak fall color season could also be made a priority to ensure that unsafe conditions do not develop because of motorists stopping in the lanes designated for moving traffic.

**Below we suggest a list of alternatives that we feel would address the goal of providing safe access to scenic viewing opportunities:**

**Alternative 1:** Place a low guardrail with (the already present) no stopping signs in the dangerous section to keep the flow of traffic moving along that section of road, encouraging people to use the already existing and newly signed pullout. This action would be similar to a no action alternative, but would improve safety by the addition of a guard rail in the smaller of the two pullouts (and signs suggested above).

**Alternative 2:** Similar to Alt. 1, but add a walkway on the other side of the guardrail connecting the two existing pullout areas (including the one that would no longer be accessible for parking because of safety concerns), just below the road, to allow people to safely walk to the area along the road that they feel is the best view of the overlook. As with Alt. 1, there would be no additional pullout area developed, but a path from the larger existing pullout could provide additional scenic viewing opportunities.

**Alternative 3:** Create a small separate lane, separated by a barrier, which allows for four RV's or cars to pull into and park parallel to the road (essentially make the road a three lane road in that section). By separating this turnout lane, it will be more convenient for vehicles, and it will increase safety of those out of their cars, though it might encourage vehicles traveling in the moving lanes to stop anyway.

**Alternative 4:** In addition to Alt. 2, block both existing pullouts with a low guardrail but add a small (enough for 4 RVs/cars) parking area out of sight further uphill of both existing pullouts, with a path next to the road and protected by a low guardrail to provide safe and scenic viewing opportunities.

**Alternative 5:** The roadside trail used to cross the road near the lower pullout. That old trail could be rehabilitated to bring walkers and hikers from the DVC parking lot or Park

Headquarters to this area. Unfortunately, this option increases pedestrian crossing of the road, but could be counterbalanced by lowering the speed limit and adding crosswalks.

Because there will not likely be enough room to accommodate parking for all vehicles who wish to stop, no matter the size of the pullout, you may want to consider limiting parking time at the pull-out. We have mixed feelings about this, because we would prefer that visitors spend more time outside of a vehicle, but do not see how a parking area will not still be maxed out, even if it is slightly enlarged. A large parking area could negatively impact the viewshed and experience of other visitors traveling along the Park Road, and we do not see that building a larger parking area alone will resolve the safety concerns.

We appreciate that Denali National Park and Preserve has opened the scoping process to the public prior to the EA process. We encourage the NPS to be proactive about protecting the unique feeling that visitors come to this park, and to Alaska for, one that is wild and unlike any they can find in parks elsewhere.

Sincerely,  
/s/ Hannah Ragland, DCC President