

Huts Update

Alaska Mountain
and Wilderness
Huts
Association



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- Marion Vicary
- Tim Jennings
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- Tom Brigham
- Charlie Barnwell

*Executive Director/
Project Director*
John Wolfe

We're on-line!

alaskahuts.org

A Message from the President

Michael Henrich

Season Greetings Everyone,

I am pleased to announce that the Huts Association is still alive and kicking. After much soul searching, the Board of Directors decided to keep the fight going to establish Huts in Alaska. At the present time we are working with the Forest Service on the Whistlestop Project in the Placer River Valley. It will be a long process, and success is not certain, but the mountains are spectacular, and it appears to be the very best option to make Huts happen. We are also talking with Alaska State Parks and hope to work with them in the future.

The last few months have been tough on the Board of Directors. We have lost Directors because of the long and frustrating process that we have been through to try and make the Huts a reality. I would greatly encourage anyone who believes in the Hut concept and would love to see it succeed to contact *(continued on p. 2)*



Photo: USDA Forest Service

Spencer Glacier Panorama. This is the view southward from a location near the proposed Spencer Bench cabin site. The railroad is visible toward the righthand edge of the photo above Spencer Lake. The valley in the background is upper Placer River, which extends south to Grandview. Map inside.

Grandview Hut-to-Hut Concept Taking Shape

John Wolfe, Executive Director

See also "What Happened?" p. 3

Alaska Huts has a new focus within Chugach National Forest. It might be called the "Grandview Trail" or "Glacier Discovery Trail." It could result in two hut sites with a hut keeper and food, plus two smaller self-service huts along the trails of the Forest Service's new backcountry Whistlestop Project (see map inside). The Whistlestop Project opened in August 2007 to provide backcountry rail stops in the spectacular glaciated region between Grandview and Spencer Glacier, south of Anchorage.

Win-win. The Forest and its partner, the Alaska Railroad, had funds to open the Whistlestop Project in August but does not have funds to complete the planned 30 miles of trail, cabins, and backcountry train platforms. In a potential a win-win situation, Alaska Huts would bring volunteer trail efforts and funding for cabins to the project, while the Forest would provide the location for Alaska's only system of multi-party huts. *(Continued on p. 2)*

President's Message

Continued from p. 1

me about becoming a board member. As we undertake this new initiative, we are in great need of people with enthusiasm and expertise who could contribute to the board.

Finally, I would like to thank our members. I appreciate all the letters, emails, and phone calls urging us to continue the effort to bring a unique and inspiring outdoor experience to the state of Alaska. I also appreciate all the past monetary contributions and urge you to continue to support the Huts through your membership dues.

Thanks again and have a wonderful Holiday Season.



Michael Henrich, President

Grandview Area a Potential Win-Win

Continued from p. 1

Alaska Huts was partway through an environmental impact statement with the Forest Service last spring for a system of four larger huts. That proposal ultimately was not favored by the Seward District because of concern over project financing, location, and size of huts. The Forest Service's greatest concern appeared to be the feasibility of raising the funds for such an extensive project. By centering the proposal on the Whistlestop location, Alaska Huts hopes to consolidate efforts with the Whistlestop Project, reduce overall new backcountry construction on the northern Kenai Peninsula, and work with the Forest Service in a shared fundraising environment to the benefit of the Whistlestop project and the Huts project. As a non-profit, Alaska Huts can bring private funds to the project and can lobby for further public funding, which the Forest Service cannot do. The Forest Service can construct portions of the project that will benefit hut users. Instead of collectively trying to bite off construction of 50+ miles of new hut-to-hut trail construction (20 miles for huts, and 30 miles for Whistlestop), there would now be 30+ miles of new construction serving both projects together. The Alaska Railroad is supportive, because this model has the promise of increasing ridership on the Whistlestop route. Where one end of the previous huts proposal had terminated at the Alaska Railroad, the new concept would center on the Whistlestop Project.

The Process. The Forest Service has indicated that any proposal that might change the way they would manage the Whistlestop Project would require additional public process. This Forest Service decision on the Whistlestop Project assumed cabins would be typical Forest Service recreation cabins and not the multi-party huts—possibly with a hut keeper, interpretive programs, and food for sale—that Alaska Huts has proposed. Of course Alaska Huts wishes for a speedy process, but an open public process is a good thing, so that the project is done right. It is likely to be a year before we could hope for a Forest Service decision. The board is interested in hearing from members now regarding this new proposal. Send your thoughts to mailbox@alaskahuts.org.

Future. Alaska Huts would like in the future to connect the Spencer Whistlestop through Center Creek Valley to the Johnson Pass Trail. This route, part of the previous proposal, would include one hut (smaller than the 20-bunk hut originally proposed) and would not include the previously-proposed hut at Center Creek Pass, a location identified by the Forest Service as having the greatest potential for impact. Ultimately, this route is important because it would provide a ski experience at a higher elevation than Spencer, accessible from a Seward Highway trailhead in an area closed to motorized vehicles at a time of year when the railroad does not plan to provide Whistlestop service; and because it would provide better access in summer for many Alaskans and budget travelers for whom the cost of the rail ticket and the hut stay might be cost prohibitive. Alaska Huts wants to provide a wide a range of hut experiences to accommodate the more rugged (and less affluent) along with those who have more money than experience.

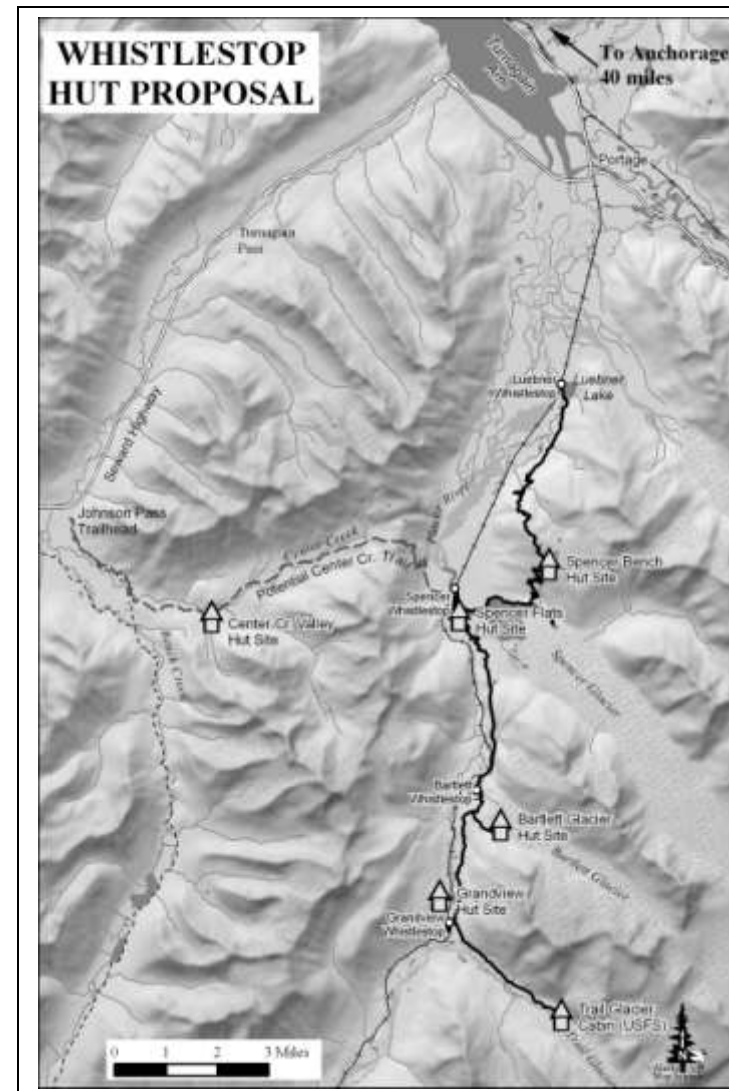
This new approach is far from guaranteed but, with spectacular glacier scenery, it looks highly promising. As the concept takes shape, Alaska Huts invites you to help form the concept as a community partner or new board member. Contact: mailbox@alaskahuts.org.

“Quoted”: Mike Goodwin

“The Huts program has analogies to approaching a mountain peak. It's been like advancing over false summits, building hope of eventually achieving the true summit. Each Huts venue we've explored, researched, calculated and presented to land managers has led to the next false summit. We continue to push on.”
(Mike Goodwin, retired from Alaska State Parks, has been a Huts board member for about a year)

Many Thanks to:

- The Alaska Railroad's **Don Worthley** and **Steve Silverstein** for getting us out into the field at the Spencer Whistlestop this fall before the snow flew.
- Chugach National Forest's Glacier District staff—**Jim Fincher** (District Ranger); **Tim Charron**; and **Adam McClory**—for spending time coming up to speed on the Huts concept and offering constructive comments regarding the potential melding of the Huts concept and the Whistlestop concept.
- **Tim Jennings**, outgoing board member and board secretary, for a stint of solid service. We have appreciated his deep experience and reasoned, balanced approach to board issues.
- **Katie Harich**, outgoing board member/vice president, for a year of enthusiastic support of all things Huts.
- **Charlie Barnwell**, long-time skier, GIS mapping and database specialist/ program manager, who joined the board in September.
- **Randy Steen**, long-time Huts volunteer (bushwhacking in the field, at conceptual hut design sessions), who came on the board at a critical time and immediately took on the President position for several months. Randy stepped down from the board in September.
- Alaska's U.S. senators **Ted Stevens** and **Lisa Murkowski**, who expressed continuing interest in huts, and whose local and D.C. staffs have been helping to ensure that funding provided through Congress for huts in Alaska does not go unused.



MAP NOTE: This map denotes a *possible proposal*. It is not yet a formal proposal. The map illustrates preliminary thinking only. **THANK YOU** to Ian Moore of Alaska Map Science for volunteer map production.

Huts slide show now available! 279-4663

Give (or get?) the Gift of Membership

It's been most of a year since Alaska Huts published a proper newsletter or mailed a membership renewal reminder. Consequently, some folks who would have responded to a membership reminder never did.

We would be most appreciative if, here at the end of the calendar year and in the season of gift-giving, you would consider *renewing* your own membership, *giving the gift of a membership* to a friend, or giving an extra *tax-deductible gift* before the year is out. Our members make us go!

Find a membership form at www.alaskahuts.org, or call 279-4663.



Detail of new Whistlestop shelter at Spencer

What Happened?

- **We sent a postcard** to members in Sept. saying we might have to suspend operations or even dissolve the organization because our proposal was 'in trouble' and the Forest Service had stopped work on the Huts environmental impact statement. We asked for input from members and supporters.
- **Anchorage Daily News** Outdoor editor/columnist Craig Medred caught wind of the postcard, called us, called the Forest Service, and wrote a high-profile column critical of the Forest Service for not supporting more trails (in fairness to the Forest Service, their issue with Huts and Medred's issue with them were completely different).
- **We had email, mail, phone, and in-person responses** from many people across the state and Lower 48, virtually all encouraging us to carry on, including one that came with a \$500 check from member Phoebe Milliken in Maine to add weight to the encouragement (thank you!). Good suggestions such as expanding partnerships came in. A couple of people did say it's been too many setbacks--time to throw in the towel.
- **The board decided** in September:
 - (a) Not throw in the towel.
 - (b) Cut back working hours to 8 hrs/wk to save funds until direction was clearer.
 - (c) Pursue leads such as the Whistlestop project and Alaska State Parks.

Our Mission:

Include Alaska's back country in a world-wide tradition of places in which hikers and skiers can travel hut to hut,

and

provide warm comfortable huts in inspiring settings to foster camaraderie and promote wilderness education and stewardship.

Alaska Mountain & Wilderness

Huts Association

**3039 Alder Circle
Anchorage, Alaska 99508**

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Inside:

- New hut-to-hut proposal in the works.
- New area; new map.
- Photos.
- What happened?

Volunteers needed

Board seat. The Alaska Huts board of directors has vacant seats. Get in on the 'ground floor' of the new Whistlestop huts concept. Contact Michael Henrich at 632-6440.

Help organize Feb. huts celebration and roll-out of the new hut proposal.
Contact: 279-4663

Member List. Track mailing list & address changes in spreadsheet or database. Four main updates per year. Contact: John at 279-4663.

**Thank you for your
on-going support.**

Check out Whistlestop Huts at Feb. Celebration

Look for notice in the mail and newspapers about our 2008 celebration of Huts for members and the public. Join us for the roll-out of the proposal for huts accessible by railroad, and for food, beverage, a chance to mingle with outdoor folks, a new slide show, large maps, photos... February. *Be there!*

Spencer Whistlestop Surroundings Magnificent

By Katie Harich

In October, Alaska Railroad Whistlestop Project Manager Don Worthley took a crew from Alaska Huts by hi-rail (truck on tracks) along the Portage section of rail to the brand new Spencer Whistlestop. I was one of the fortunate few who explored the area.

Huts volunteer Ian Moore and president Michael Henrich headed off fast for the Spencer Bench cabin site. I shadowed John Wolfe, Alaska Huts executive director, and together we set out with a copy of the Forest Service's Whistlestop Record of Decision document, opened to a map, in search of the proposed Spencer Flats cabins/huts site. The autumn sun came up over the mountains and burst through the clouds, lighting the frosted grasses and the snowy higher slopes around us. After some serious bushwhacking, we found flagging that marked a brushed-out foot trail and eventually, in meadows backed by low, alder-covered hills, we arrived at the designated location for a cluster of three cabins. The site is enveloped by towering, snowcapped mountains. Five minutes from the proposed cabin site is the scenic Placer River, and visible upstream, its headwaters, Spencer Lake. In Spencer Lake are icebergs calved from Spencer Glacier, just one of the glaciers responsible for this lovely scenic valley.

These valleys are truly a stellar location for backcountry huts and rival any other hut site worldwide in their foot trail potential coupled with superior views of Spencer Glacier, an iceberged lake, and nearly 360 degrees of mountains.

To finish, John and I walked the Whistlestop's first completed route, a graveled foot trail that leads from the whistlestop platform to a viewing area at Spencer Lake, about a 20-minute walk past a few date markers showing the retreat of Spencer Glacier over the last century. At the lake is a nicely sculpted rock-wall viewing platform. We took in the sight of mountains, lake, glacier, and bergs. Simply magnificent.