

Alaska Mountain and Wilderness Huts Association

Manitoba and Whistle Stop Huts: Short-Term and Long Term Vision

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At a meeting of the board of directors held October 21, 2008, the Alaska Huts Association decided to focus its long-term and near-term efforts. A hut-to-hut system associated with the Whistle Stop Project along the Alaska Railroad is the long-term vision. As the trails and infrastructure for that project develop, Alaska Huts will pursue a phase I operation involving one hut and one yurt site at Manitoba Mountain. Details follow.

The Big Picture

Alaska Huts has always been committed to establishing a *system* of backcountry huts and creation of a hut-to-hut experience and that commitment has not changed. Most recently, Alaska Huts has been exploring huts associated with the Whistle Stop Project. In 2008, Alaska Huts participated in extensive and detailed trail survey for two trail routes to the Spencer Bench cabin site and for the route southward from Spencer toward Bartlett Glacier. Volunteers also completed reconnaissance of Grandview, Bartlett Glacier, and Spencer Flats and met several times with the Glacier Ranger District. The old Manitoba Cabin also has been a subject of long-term interest, and Alaska Huts investigated it in Fall 2008.

Following are observations that informed the board's decision on October 21:

1. The mining claim and mining plan of action for the land surrounding the old Manitoba Cabin apparently lapsed, and the claim is no longer valid. The State of Alaska's land selection on the parcel was therefore unencumbered. The process to convey the land from federal hands to state hands began automatically but is not yet complete. The state would normally require the federal government to remove such a cabin before conveyance.
2. The Forest Service has consistently requested a formal proposal with full financial modeling and a financial plan for funding construction of huts along the Whistle Stop project. Alaska Huts has consistently requested a partnership for joint development of the plan.
3. While the Forest Service has an approved plan for trails, Whistle Stop platforms, and cabins and has located sites and routes in the field, the agency has mostly run out of its initial funds and does not appear to have more funding immediately forthcoming and has no firm plan for the sequence of construction.
4. The Forest Service is on the verge of approving a mineral extraction plan that could last 15 years or more near the Spencer Flats Whistle Stop and within visual and audible range of the Spencer Bench cabin site and other points on the proposed trail system. The effect on existing and potential users is not known, especially pertaining to those who might be seeking a backcountry hut experience.
5. Spring and summer 2008 resulted in a huge snowfall in the Kenai Mountains and a slow, cool, melt-off such that there was up to 8 feet of continuous snow cover in the Grandview-Bartlett area and similar amounts in extensive patches at Spencer Bench at the end of June. Snow remained on that portion of the proposed trail on the old railroad bed (between Tunnel and Bartlett) on September 15.

6. Detailed trail construction survey work and cost estimating for Alaska Huts by Happy Trails, LLC in summer 2008 indicated the cost of construction in the shallow-soil-over-bedrock conditions that characterize critical portions of the Whistlestop area confirmed that trail construction will be very expensive in that area.
7. Use of the new Whistle Stop trails by independent users appears to have been low in this first full season of operation.

Alaska Huts has considered these points and determined that there is no reasonable way at this time to propose a firm Whistle Stop concept on our own (i.e. without a joint development partnership of some kind with the Forest Service), given that the Forest Service funding and construction sequencing are in flux for the trails and Whistle Stop platforms. Currently, it appears that many more years could pass before the expensive construction of trails necessary to even partially link a hut-to-hut system would be in place. The mining proposal has raised questions about the wisdom of investing in an expensive first permanent hut near the noise and visual disturbance of a major commercial gravel and rock mining operation at Spencer, where Whistle Stop development has begun. The prospect of starting huts at the other end, near Grandview, Trail Glacier, and Bartlett Glacier and away from the Spencer mining, appears undermined by the lack of trails in that area and the unknown timing of trail and Whistle Stop platform construction. In addition, the late snowpack and snow on the route all summer in the higher elevations near Bartlett and Grandview has raised questions about the wisdom of a first hut in such conditions. Greater assessment of hut sites and trail locations appears warranted to find the areas that melt off earliest. Finally, use of the Whistle Stop project for purposes other than (a) viewing out the windows of the train, or (b) using the raft service appears low at this time. Further assessment of likely future ridership at current costs by Alaskans and independent travelers appears warranted before making permanent investments in huts. Temporary shelters may be appropriate.

Meanwhile, the Manitoba Cabin area presents an opportunity. Manitoba (a) has been a known winter use/ ski area for decades, (b) has a known history of cabin use by the Nordic Skiing Association of Anchorage year round, with use levels rivaling the most popular Forest Service recreation cabins, (c) is accessible by truck for construction, (d) has a high-quality trail in place for approximately 3 miles, (e) is in a beautiful area that combines forest, river, gorge, alpine and mountain ground cover, and (f) provides reasonably safe and high-quality mountain skiing terrain and touring terrain as well as summer activity. Its main drawback is that it, too, has mining in the surrounding area, although this is primarily recreational mining and the mining history fits well with the site and Alaska Huts education mission.

Based on these considerations, the board of directors decided to pursue the course of action outlined below.

Long Range Vision: Huts Associated with Whistle Stop

Since 2004, the Alaska Huts focus of interest has been the area generally north of Trail Lake, South of Tincan Peak, east of the Seward Hwy, and west of Spencer/Bartlett/Trail Glaciers. The focus for a hut-to hut system remains in this area, and especially on a hut-to-hut system tied to the Whistle Stop project. Specific locations for huts,¹ the size of huts, numbers of huts, and timing of

¹ A likely scenario would use the proposed Glacier Discovery Trail in its entirety (ca 25 mi) to link multi-party huts at Spencer Bench (8 bunks), Spencer Flats (16), and Grandview (16), with public use cabins at Spencer Flats (near the

construction of huts will be determined following evaluation of an initial effort at Manitoba Mountain, as described below. Development of a hut-to-hut system will be dependent on evolution of other current projects such the Whistle Stop Project, Spencer Mineral Extraction, and the Iditarod Trail from Seward to Girdwood.

Phase I: Manitoba Mountain

Alaska Huts intends to establish a permanent and attractive multi-party hut on the historic Manitoba Cabin site, and it would be called Manitoba Cabin. Connected to it 2 miles away by existing trail and a short segment of new trail and located at the edge of the alpine zone on Manitoba Mountain would be a yurt site called the Manitoba Outpost. Together, these Manitoba “hut” facilities would be meant to showcase the multiparty hut concept and give Alaska Huts and partner trail groups the opportunity to try various operating modes in a relatively low-risk environment, before embarking on a larger system of huts in an area not accessible by road. To provide a package of interest to visitors to Alaska, and to make the conceptual link from the Manitoba site to the future Whistle Stop sites, Alaska Huts intends to work with the Alaska Railroad to create a package that pairs the Manitoba hut experience with Whistle Stop train excursions.

Physical Layout. The new Manitoba Cabin would be located on the site of the historic Manitoba Cabin, immediately downstream of the confluence of Juneau, Canyon, and Fresno Creeks. The site is intended to show a multi-party hut as a permanent structure, a kind of showcase for a modest size attractive permanent facility. The construction process could use the existing building or a yurt as a transitional or permanent element of the site. Further assessment of the existing building is necessary to determine its remaining usefulness. It may be cost-effective to restore it for public use as an integral part of the hut site, or for general use during transition to an all-new hut. The old building could remain as an outbuilding near a new hut, suitable for storage, workshop, and historic interpretation purposes. In any case, the site would have a bunk capacity of approximately 16, plus space for a hut keeper, with possible overflow area in an attic or in tents for occasional larger groups. The hut is intended to operate summer and winter, with an emphasis on winter for ski touring and telemarking.

The Manitoba Outpost site would contain one larger temporary (re-) moveable yurt or possibly two smaller yurts. The site is located at the edge of alpine zone on the slopes of Manitoba Mountain. The site’s bunk capacity would be approximately 8. The site would provide alpine views into Mills Creek, toward Summit Lake, and into the heart of the Kenai Mountains.

Water at the Cabin site is likely to be available from the stream or a known spring year round and likely will require hauling by hand (uphill) and filtering. Water at the Outpost site will come from a combination of a surface stream and rain collection, in summer, with a storage tank. In winter, snowmelt will provide water. Heat and cooking fuel is likely to be propane alone at the Outpost site and propane and wood at the Cabin site. Both sites are expected to operate initially using a standard pit toilet outhouse, with transition to a composting toilet system particularly at the Cabin site.

larger hut), at Bartlett, and at Trail Glacier built by the Forest Service and operated by Alaska Huts principally as traditional public use cabins, but with some percentage allocated for linked hut-to-hut reservations. This is an example of a full future hut-to-hut vision and is not being formally proposed to the Forest Service and State of Alaska at this time.

Operations. The Cabin and Outpost together would be meant to showcase the multiparty hut concept and give a small taste of what a hut-to-hut system could be. The operations of the Manitoba Cabin and Manitoba Outpost site would differ but complement each other. Both would offer shelter, heat, bed space, and access to the outdoors year round as the primary services. The Manitoba Cabin site would be larger and better equipped for cooking and storing food and for providing educational materials. As such, it would serve as the base for access to the Outpost. During popular periods, a hut keeper would stay at the Cabin and help people understand the multi-party management of both sites, and would check regularly on the Outpost site. Basic foods may be available for sale at the Cabin site, and some periods could offer higher service levels with food prepared for guests. The Cabin site would offer somewhat greater privacy than the Outpost, where sleeping is likely to be in a common area. The Outpost site would have minimal food storage, and people could pack what they needed from the Cabin to the Outpost. The Outpost site also is expected to operate with more emphasis on day use during specified daytime hours, after which the hut would be closed except to people staying overnight.

Land Status. Manitoba Cabin is located on federal land managed by the Forest Service but is entirely surrounded by state land. It was retained in federal ownership as long as it had an active federal mining claim on it. The mining claim is no longer active, and the state selection of the land has moved toward formal conveyance to the state.

The Outpost site is located on federal Forest Service land that is selected by the state but not yet on a conveyance track.

The existing trail from the Seward Highway to the Manitoba Cabin and beyond to Mills Creek is classified by the Forest Service as a Forest Road and lies within a Forest Service easement where it crosses state land. The easement is intended to provide for public use and public access to Forest lands. The Forest Service lands are closed to motorized vehicles in winter, and the road is open in summer to four-wheeler ATV traffic only to miners who hold claims, and only by permit, although enforcement appears poor. State lands in the area are closed to motorized vehicle use in winter.

Process: The state would need to take ownership of Manitoba site. It appears best for Alaska Huts to request retaining the cabin and to forge an agreement with the state that would give Alaska Huts liability for the cabin at the moment of transfer from the Forest Service. We could later take the cabin down if it was found not cost-effective to salvage and appeared to be too much liability for our own comfort, or if it was decided that a new hut would best be placed on the same site.

Issues:

- The land transfer could drag out due to a reported state backlog, but the actual transfer process apparently is very quick. The issue just needs to be brought “to the top of the stack.” Working with two agencies, state and federal, is likely to slow the process somewhat. The Forest Service likely would need to do an environmental assessment for the yurt site, and the state likely would need to concur with any Forest decision to approve a permit because of the state land selection. A temporary structure like a yurt should be easier to get through the Forest approval process than a permanent structure. It is likely, however, that the permit would be issued on much shorter-term than a permanent structure.
- Road accessibility for construction, resupply, and administration of the sites is an advantage, but road access and proximity to the Seward Highway would also lead to higher risk of vandalism. An on-site hut keeper will be a good idea during much of the year, and frequent checks will be necessary when no hut keeper is on site.

- The Manitoba area has decent year-round use potential, as a known ski area and with a summer trail few know about that is good for walking and for mountain biking.
- Mining in the Manitoba Cabin area could be a conflict in summer—visual, noise, interaction between miners who may be protective of their claims and recreationists who may be curious.
- Seward and Anchorage ski clubs have expressed interest in using and helping to maintain the cabin. Partnerships with these and other trail/outdoor groups appear to be a logical way to gain support and ensure oversight of the hut and yurt sites.
- Parking/trailhead is assumed to be (a) at the gravel pit near MP 49, which is also the head of the current road into the Manitoba Cabin area, (b) at a highway pullout at MP 48, near Fresno Creek, which is the traditional access point for the Manitoba Cabin, or (c) at the end of the old highway alignment which serves as access to the private cabins (off the highway near MP 48). It may be necessary to establish a formal access plan with the state and/or Forest Service and will presumably be necessary to seek formal approval for administrative use of vehicles.
- Summit Lake Lodge and a Forest Service campground are located a short way up the highway. It would be a good idea to work with the lodge (private) and the Forest Service to ensure that the programs offered at the hut and yurt sites are different from those offered at the other two sites, and perhaps to provide joint offerings to the public that take advantage of the unique qualities of each site (people at the campground or lodge could visit the hut sites on day trips to learn more about the area, and hut users could take advantage of lodge amenities like dining room, ice cream, and showers, and could take advantage of boating or bird viewing on Summit Lake).
- Private vacation cabins are located near MP 48, and it would be a good idea to work with cabin owners to ensure Alaska Huts is a good neighbor. Mutual security checks may be a good way benefit all parties.
- Specifics regarding water and wastewater and kitchen permits for public health and sanitation will need to be addressed carefully for standard operations and for special periods where food may be prepared by volunteers or staff for hut users. This backcountry and off-the-grid location, and with an unusual operations pattern that is a blend of ‘do-it-yourself’ and ‘service-provided,’ may be outside the normal patterns seen by the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation and may require extra effort to resolve.