



Jonathan Wilkinson
Member of Parliament for North Vancouver

Ms. Bonnie Fromm
Save the Waterton Field
BonnieFromm@gmail.com

November 15, 2017

Subject: Location of a new visitor centre in Waterton Lakes National Park

Dear Ms. Fromm:

I would like to thank you for taking the time to meet with me on August 31, 2017, during my visit to Waterton Lakes National Park. Shortly after my visit, as you know very well, Waterton Lakes National Park was heavily impacted by the Kenow wildfire. Though large portions of the Park were burned, I was very pleased to see that the Waterton townsite was spared from the wildfire thanks to the efforts of Parks Canada staff and its many skilled fire management partners. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of the community's residents and businesses during that very trying time.

I also acknowledge receipt of your November 9 email asking for an update following my visit to Waterton Lakes National Park.

As I indicated at the August 31, 2017 meeting, I am aware of the views expressed by some Waterton community groups about Parks Canada's selected location for a new visitor centre at Waterton Lakes National Park. The objective of my visit to Waterton was to enable me to see the lay of the land and to hear directly your views on this matter. With regard to the visitor centre issue, I was particularly interested to determine if there was new information or new issues that have not yet been considered. My visit also provided an opportunity for me to hear about other matters of importance to the community of Waterton.

During our meeting, I committed to respond to the matters raised by Save the Waterton Field. Below you will find a response to the points you raised when we met with respect to the selected location for a new visitor centre:

1. Block 39 Zoning

Issue raised by STWF: "The 2000 Waterton Community Plan designates Block 39 as a Recreational Reserve" - and thus the current zoning of the proposed Block 39 location of a new visitor centre is not appropriate.

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Response: I have reviewed this concern with Parks Canada. I understand that the location is in fact consistent with zoning in the Community Plan. The Block 39 property is, as you note, designated as “Recreational Reserve”. Under the definition of “Recreational Reserve” in the plan, buildings that support recreational or cultural uses, such as a visitor centre, are permitted. The status of Block 39 has not been altered by Parks Canada during discussions relating to a new visitor centre.

2. Management Plan

Issue raised by STWF: “Parks Canada has not followed the 2010 Waterton Management Plan.”

Response: On review, it is quite clear that the site does respect the vision of the 2010 Waterton Management Plan, which reinforces the community’s primary function as a visitor service centre; designates the Waterton Community as a visitor centre, and; aims to ensure that the community’s primary function will remain as a service centre for visitors with a wide range of interpretation and orientation services. The *Canada National Parks Act* designates the townsite as the center for visitor services in Waterton Lakes National Park.

3. Views of Parks Management

Issue raised by STWF: “Parks Canada’s own managers in Waterton think building the visitor centre on Block 39 is a terrible idea.”

Response: As part of the decision-making process for significant projects - such as the visitor centre in Waterton Lakes National Park - Parks Canada, as all reasonable organizations, welcomes open discussion, both internally and externally. Prior to making any determination regarding the location of the visitor centre, Parks Canada established a process that included: collecting background information, conducting an external study, soliciting opinions from managers and staff at the Waterton Lakes National Park, as well as a range of stakeholders and leaseholders, and, through this, identifying the best fit option.

In the context of such an assessment, federal agencies such as Parks Canada welcome input and diverse opinions from amongst its staff. Having run businesses in the past myself, this is, in my mind, precisely how this type of process should work.

With regard to the visitor centre decision, all possible locations were considered by Parks Canada. The process leading to the decision on the location of the visitor centre was rigorous and transparent. All of the input received was carefully considered in the decision-making process, including the opinion of its staff. Ultimately however a decision must be made – one that may not achieve unanimity of opinions amongst stakeholders or even amongst staff members.

4. Indigenous Organizations

Issue raised by STWF: “Parks Canada did not consult the local Indigenous groups prior to announcing the Block 39 visitor centre location, or if they did consult them, they ignored their input.”

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Response: Parks Canada has engaged directly with the Kainai (Blood) and the Piikani First Nation in a consistent and extensive manner throughout this process both before and after the announcement, including on a program to ensure integration of the Blackfoot connection to Waterton into the overall site development, meeting with the Kainai (Blood) First Nation Chief and Council (November 2015, March 2016) and with community council/representatives (February 2017, March 2017, August 2017), and the Piikani Chief and Council (June 2016) and with community/council representatives (August 2017).

I would add that working together with more than 300 Indigenous communities across Canada, Parks Canada is committed to telling the story and celebrating the contributions of Indigenous Peoples, their histories and cultures, as well as the special relationships Indigenous Peoples have with the lands and waters. As such, Parks Canada has been closely working with Kainai and Piikani First Nations to jointly develop interpretive programming that will allow visitors to the national park to learn about Kainai and Piikani First Nations' culture, history and connection to Waterton Lakes National Park.

Both the Chief of the Kainai and Piikani First Nations were invited to meet with me during my visit to Waterton on August 31, 2017 to discuss any matters that are important to them.

Parks Canada very much values the relationship with the Blackfoot. Parks Canada will continue to work closely with Kainai and Piikani First Nations on matters relating to the management of Waterton Lakes National Park.

5. Traffic and traffic safety

Issue raised by STWF: "Parks Canada has done zero traffic or safety studies to suggest that a visitor centre on Block 39 is safe."

Response: I have reviewed your concern with Parks Canada staff. Based on this review, it is clear that Parks Canada carefully considered traffic volume and management when it assessed possible locations for a new visitor centre. As you may be aware, Parks Canada has a traffic management plan in place that has been recently updated. The 2011 visitor survey tells us that 98% of all visitors to Waterton Lakes National Park already visit the townsite. The existing traffic congestion management plan provides the appropriate tool to ensure the best and safest experience for our visitors.

Presently, Waterton Lakes National Park monitors inbound/outbound traffic in real time through modelling against past years' data, on-the-ground observations and recent visitation trends. Traffic conditions are communicated to visitors via electronic signage on entry routes, social media, websites and local media.

In addition, as we move forward we will ensure that a traffic engineer will provide a technical review during the design stages of a new visitor facility and a comprehensive study for the final design. This work will assess and ensure that we address parking and traffic concerns. Where necessary, we will implement further measures to manage or mitigate concerns.

Potential growth in traffic arising from increased visitation to the Park more generally will be managed through the implementation of long-standing plans to increase parking and improve way-finding throughout the townsite. In addition, a traffic management program for high congestion visitor areas, including the townsite, will be implemented. Planning also includes the Waterton Community Plan's designation of Windflower Avenue and Cameron Falls Drive as major vehicular routes in the townsite.

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In future, Parks Canada will consider the possibility of a transit system as a potential solution in the future for traffic congestion – if that becomes necessary if/as visitation levels increase. As per established Parks Canada practices, any long-term investments will be made responsibly based on the evolving needs of the Park and its visitors.

I would note that Parks Canada manages a large number of sites across Canada with traffic conditions similar to those which Waterton experiences during busy periods in the summer. This very much includes sites in national parks where the visitor centres are located within the townsites.

Parks Canada's safety record with regard to traffic and traffic management is long-standing, excellent, and a matter of public record.

Parks Canada very much looks forward to continuing to work with stakeholders to look at new ways of continually improving traffic flow and mobility within Waterton Lakes National Park.

6. Treasury Board

Issue Raised by STWF: "Parks Canada has not followed required procedures for Treasury Board Approval for visitor centre funding."

Response: I have reviewed this question and understand that this project, as all FII (Federal Infrastructure Investment Program) projects under \$15 million, is exempted from the Treasury Board Secretariat process. However, Parks Canada undertook the necessary reviews for this project, as part of its due diligence and in compliance with its internal project management standards. As such, Parks Canada has indeed followed all required procedures for the approval of the visitor centre funding.

7. Emergency Evacuation

Issue raised by STWF: "Parks Canada has not properly considered the impact on emergency townsite evacuation due to increased congestion from a townsite visitor centre."

Response: Waterton Lakes National Park has emergency plans in place and works closely when appropriate with federal and provincial agencies and local authorities to ensure the safety of visitors and residents whatever the nature of the emergency. The recent timely and orderly evacuation of Waterton Lakes National Park due to the Kenow wildfire is a demonstration of the effectiveness of Parks Canada's planning in this regard, and that public safety is a top priority for the Agency. These plans are regularly reviewed and adjusted as required and will continue to be going forward.

8. Litigation

Issue raised by STWF: STWF has launched a legal challenge to the process.

Response: My understanding is that in February 2017 the Federal Court of Canada disposed of a motion challenging Parks Canada's decision on the location of a new visitor centre, and that in October 2017 the Federal Court of Appeal dismissed an appeal of the February decision.

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9. Public Consultation

Issue raised by the STWF: “There was insufficient consultation with the community regarding the location of the visitor centre.”

Response: Any decision relating to a visitor centre at Waterton must be based on the role of the townsite of Waterton as the center for visitor services in the national park as set out in the *Canada National Parks Act*, the Waterton Lakes National Park Management Plan and the Waterton Community Plan. The Act, the management plan and the community plan were all subject to extensive national consultations.

In particular, the Waterton Lakes National Park Management Plan reflects the expectations that Canadians have clearly identified for the current and future management of the park.

Before Parks Canada made any decision on the location of the visitor centre and also following the location decision, Parks Canada directly engaged discussions with a range of stakeholders and leaseholders.

Public consultations prior to the March 7, 2016, announcement included:

- Waterton Park Community Association (August 2015);
- Waterton Lakes Leaseholders Association (September 2015, November 2015, December 2015);
- Waterton Park Chamber of Commerce (September 2015);
- Rotary International Peace Park (September 2015);
- Rotary Club Lethbridge East (November 2015);
- Kainai (Blood) First Nation Chief and Council (November 2015).

Public consultations after the March 7, 2016, announcement were also extensive and included:

- Kainai (Blood) First Nation Chief (March 2016);
- Stakeholders engagement (May 2016), including: Alberta Southwest Regional Alliance, Improvement District #4, Save the Waterton Field, Travel Alberta, Waterton Biosphere Reserve Association, Waterton Chamber of Commerce, Waterton Park Community Association, Waterton Lakes Leaseholders Association, and Waterton Natural History Association;
- Piikani Chief and Council (June 2016);
- Public information session in Waterton on June 18 and 19, 2016. At that session, the public was invited to submit any new information that Parks Canada had not yet considered. A report from the public information session is available on Parks Canada’s website.

10. Parks Canada Ethics

Issue raised by the STWF: “Parks Canada has breached their own Values and Ethics Code.”

Response: I have seen no evidence that Parks Canada has in any way breached its own Values and Ethics Code.

With respect to the visitation numbers your group has highlighted, the methodology used by Parks Canada for all the national parks and national historic sites has refined over the years. This has allowed the Agency to gather better visitation data with greater statistical validity.

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With regard to the reference you make to a particular contract, in this case Parks Canada followed the proper procedures and the services were received in accordance with the terms and conditions laid out in the contract.

11. Alternative visitor centre sites

Issue raised by STWF: "Insufficient consideration was given to potential alternative sites for a new visitor centre."

Response: Several alternative locations for the visitor centre were considered during the site selection process undertaken by Parks Canada. However, none of the alternative sites offered all of the advantages of the townsite location.

One of the possible locations you noted that was researched and assessed was the Parks Canada operations compound. However, as a location for visitor services and information, the operations compound involves a number of concerns for the quality of visitor experience and for visitor safety and has been determined to be unsuitable as a location for visitor services and information. Specifically:

- The compound is the centre for all of Parks Canada's operational activities in the park, including sewage and garbage management and so experiences a high volume of heavy vehicle traffic. This poses safety risks for visitors and noise and distraction concerns.
- Access to the operations compound is directly from the only route into the national park, so vehicles turning into and leaving from the location can cause traffic delays and congestion which would be compounded if the site incorporated a visitor centre.
- Combining visitor and operations traffic would likely compromise the speed of operations services that are critical to the community
- The operations compound is beyond normal walking distance from the townsite. This would mean visitors wishing to participate in interpretive activities or obtain information while in the community would have to drive to the compound, increasing traffic congestion on Waterton's main road as well as in the townsite.

I would like to note that Parks Canada's selection of the site for a new visitor centre was based on four primary criteria: a) how best to serve park visitors, b) how best to achieve Parks Canada's objectives, c) how best to achieve maximum value of the investment, and d) the role of the Waterton townsite as the center for visitor services in the national park as set out in the *Canada National Parks Act*, the *Waterton Lakes National Park Management Plan* and the *Waterton Community Plan*.

The townsite location was selected as the best possible site by Parks given that it will offer visitors and residents the best possible experience while ensuring a number of other important objectives can be achieved. Specifically:

- A new visitor centre will significantly increase services to the hundreds of thousands of visitors who come to Waterton Lakes National Park annually. This location will maximize the opportunity for Parks Canada to connect directly, and multiple times during a stay, with the greatest number of visitors through welcome, orientation and a full range of interpretive programming. One improvement will be the ability to increase the sharing of information about avoiding human-wildlife conflicts, and the consequences that frequently follow such instances.
- A visitor centre in the townsite will also encourage walking among visitors and limit vehicle use within the townsite (i.e., people can walk from their accommodation to the visitor centre multiple times during their stay).

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- Since 98% of all park visitors go to the townsite, the townsite location of a new visitor centre is expected to connect with the most visitors, reduce traffic congestion during the busy summer months along the main road into the townsite and provide easier walking access from anywhere in the village.
- The townsite location provides the best value for money as it permits consolidation and the subsequent removal of up to three aging Parks Canada facilities (the existing visitor centre, the townsite administration building and possibly the interpretive theatre).
- The townsite location offers greater potential to minimize environmental and ecosystem impacts because it is within the footprint of the community of Waterton, so would not require removal of land from conservation. The townsite location also is one of few locations that can accommodate the size of the visitor centre facility.

Having now seen the potential alternative sites personally and having reviewed the pros and cons associated with the main potential locations, I concur that Block 39 is the most appropriate location – a location that will enable the National Park to fulfill its mandate in a manner that can also work well for the local community.

Overall, with respect to the location of a new visitor centre in the townsite, after having heard and seriously considered your views and concerns as well as those expressed by other stakeholders, and after reviewing and assessing once again how Parks Canada came to its decision, I want to let you know that I am of the view that a new Waterton Lakes National Park visitor center should be constructed at Block 39 in the townsite of Waterton. In coming to this determination, I have carefully considered the concerns that have been expressed and am of the view that such concerns have either already been addressed or that they will be addressed through ongoing management planning.

I have reviewed my findings with the Honourable Catherine McKenna, Minister of Environment and Climate Change and Minister responsible for Parks Canada, and she supports this decision – which we both believe is the best path forward to meet the present and future needs of Waterton Lakes National Park, its environment, its visitors and all Canadians.

Going forward, Parks Canada will continue to work closely with all partners and stakeholders as a new visitor centre progresses and as efforts are deployed to continue the recovery from the Kenow fire.

I thank you for your ongoing effort and work to make Waterton Lakes National Park such a special place for all Canadians.

Yours sincerely,



Jonathan Wilkinson
Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Environment and Climate Change

c.c.: Mr. John Barlow, Member of Parliament for Foothills
Mr. Glen Motz, Member of Parliament for Medicine Hat – Cardston - Warner

