



LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL MONUMENT

General Management Plan Amendment
Public Comment Summary Report

January 2015



INTRODUCTION

Public scoping is an early phase of planning devoted to engaging the public in determining the future for the project area. Public involvement is essential to planning for the amendment to the general management plan (GMP) at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. With that in mind, Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument initiated a public scoping period with the release of a general management plan amendment public scoping newsletter on October 30, 2014. The scoping period concluded on December 15, 2014. During this period, the National Park Service gathered input from the public through various means. This input will help determine the range of reasonable alternatives to be considered for addressing the issues with the outdated visitor center. This document describes these public involvement efforts and summarizes the input received.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

When the visitor center was built in 1952, about 100,000 people visited the monument every year. Since then, visitation has tripled and now averages more than 300,000 people a year. The monument currently has no auditorium and until 2008 a basement storage room was used to show the monument film. This practice was discontinued because the basement space is not wheelchair accessible and has safety and fire code issues.

Now, visitors must crowd into the visitor center's observation room, which has become the monument's theater, with a capacity of about 30 people at a time. There, they watch the 25-minute monument orientation film. During peak summer visitation, many visitors stand outside the theater in an attempt to see the presentation. These visitors standing outside the observation room trying to see the film often take up one-third of the museum's floor space, further limiting visitor opportunities to see museum exhibits. This results in a poor quality experience for both museum visitors and film viewers. The cramped exhibit space in the current visitor center displays outdated exhibits, which do not reflect a well-defined history of the battlefield or convey diverse perspectives.

To hear a ranger's interpretive talk, visitors gather on a patio that typically holds seasonal crowds of up to 150 people. The space affords little protection from inclement weather, extreme temperatures, rattlesnakes and other wildlife, or the noise of traffic from the nearby road.

In 2011, a decision was made to temporarily relocate the museum and archival collections to the Western Archeological Conservation Center in Arizona. The movement of the collections to Arizona prompted a strong feeling of anxiety and loss among the tribes whose history is closely tied to Little Bighorn. Other stakeholders are also tremendously interested in the expedient return of the collections, and the National Park Service is committed to returning the collections to the monument.

The current general management plan (1986, updated 1995) calls for building a new visitor center away from Last Stand Hill. Although some parking and services would have remained on-site, this was seen as a way to partially restore the landscape. To date, the National Park Service has not been able to fully implement the general management plan.

One of the key challenges is deciding where to put the visitor center. The National Park Service once believed that in all national park units it was best to keep buildings close to main attractions, such as Last Stand Hill. More recently, the National Park Service has focused on restoring historic landscapes. Would moving the visitor center enhance or undermine the visitor experience?

The National Park Service has previously proposed expanding the current visitor center. Receiving NPS approval in 2008, the expansion would have included a large multipurpose room and provided improved exhibit space, among other benefits. Some park advocates opposed the plan because of the impact the construction would have on the landscape, and because it seemed to be a retreat from the goal of moving the facilities off-site. These concerns led the National Park Service to withdraw approval of the plan, and the out-of-date visitor center has remained largely untouched ever since.

A general management plan amendment is needed to provide clear guidance for the most appropriate location and future management of the visitor center. The amendment will reconsider recommendations identified in the 1986 plan and in subsequent planning efforts. It will also explore existing and new alternatives related to the location and functions of the visitor center and include a "no-action" alternative that will serve as a baseline to compare the action alternatives against.



SCOPING OVERVIEW

Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument is treasured by the general public and many other entities affiliated with the park. Therefore, during the public scoping phase for the general management plan amendment, NPS staff made every effort to engage interested or affected agencies, organizations, members of the public, and recognized tribes.

NOTIFYING THE PUBLIC

To ensure a high degree of transparency and involvement with the public, the National Park Service announced opportunities to participate in the planning process in many different ways. A scoping newsletter including a comment card was sent in October 2014 via direct mail to park visitors, park neighbors, organized stakeholder groups, and other interested parties. In addition, the National Park Service sent formal consultation letters to tribes and regulatory agencies. These mailings were meant to update the public on the project, announce opportunities for involvement, and initiate the formal public scoping period. A press release was also issued, and public meetings were advertised via local media outlets, the park website, and social media tools. Comments were also solicited online at the NPS Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) website (<http://parkplanning.nps.gov/LIBI>), and comment cards were made available online and at the public meeting and the park's visitor center. Comments from park employees were also solicited. The public was invited to submit comments through December 15, 2014.

Scoping Meetings

The National Park Service conducted several scoping meetings in November 2014 to gather the public's ideas on identifying a range of reasonable alternatives.

One open-house in Hardin, Montana on November 5 and one virtual public meeting on November 12 were held to promote a high level of interaction between the public and planning team personnel. The park superintendent also met with the Hardin Area Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture on November 18. At each of these meetings, the NPS staff gave a PowerPoint presentation regarding the planning effort and then were available to answer questions about the background, issues, and a reasonable range of alternatives. An electronic copy of the PowerPoint presentation was made available online at the PEPC website for the park.

Attendance at the open-house in Hardin consisted of members from the local communities. The virtual public meeting allowed those interested who lived in distant areas to attend and interact with the planning staff. Altogether, 9 people and 5 people respectively attended the two public meetings, with 12 people at the Chamber of Commerce, for a total of 25 people.

Additionally, a government-to-government consultation meeting with the tribes traditionally associated with Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument was held at the monument on October 15, 2014. Attendees at this meeting included NPS staff, representatives from the Standing Rock Sioux, Cheyenne River Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Northern Arapaho tribes. NPS staff met separately with Crow tribal representatives on December 18. The comments and concerns raised from these meetings will be considered as part of this public scoping process.

Public Comments

To help solicit comments from the public, the planning team developed two topic questions that were included on the comment card:

1. What concerns do you have about the visitor center at the monument? Why?
2. How do you think the monument's visitor center issues can best be addressed? Why?

Comment analysis was initiated on December 20, 2014, and any correspondence received after that date was retained for consideration but was not analyzed. During the public comment period, 19 pieces of correspondence were entered into the PEPC system, either through direct entry by commenter or uploading hard copy letters or electronic correspondence. Attendees at public scoping meetings also offered a number of valuable comments, which individuals or NPS staff incorporated into the comment analysis. While private individuals submitted most of the correspondence, multiple members or representatives of local businesses, local governments, and conservation and historical organizations also submitted correspondence. The majority of commenters were from the United States, although one comment was received from Great Britain. Thirty-seven percent of the commenters were from Montana; 11% each from Arizona and New York; 5% each from Colorado, Florida, Maryland, and Texas; and the remaining respondent did not identify a state. Organizations represented by comments include the following (these organizations are those commenters who self-identified as official representatives for the organization, or were discerned to be affiliated with an organization from the content of their comments):

- Billings Chamber of Congress
- Coalition of National Park Service Retirees
- Custer Battlefield Preservation Committee
- Friends of Little Bighorn Battlefield



WHAT WE HEARD

During the public scoping period, the National Park Service received many valuable comments that will help guide development of the general management plan amendment. All comments are summarized by topic on subsequent pages of this report, in no particular order. Although most comments responded to the two topic questions mentioned above, some responses were more general in nature or outside the scope of this planning effort. However, every effort has been made to incorporate these sentiments into the most appropriate category below.

Comment Summary by Topic Area

Remodel the existing visitor center and museum storage facility

Commenters expressed both support for and opposition to remodeling the existing visitor center and museum storage facility at its current location. Those who support remodeling the existing facility do so only in the face of land ownership issues that may preclude or complicate construction of a new facility elsewhere. These commenters would consider the remodel closer to an immediate temporary solution, or “Band-Aid,” until those issues can be resolved. Those opposed to remodeling the existing facility at its current location cited reasons including high costs of remodeling that may still not completely address the issues, inability of a remodel to address the long-term needs of the monument, and the continued impact on the cultural landscape from the location of the facility at the base of Last Stand Hill.

Build a new visitor center and museum storage facility in the same location

Some commenters suggested rebuilding a new visitor center and museum storage facility in the same location as the existing visitor center. These commenters felt that having a new visitor center in its current location would continue to augment the visitor experience by allowing visitors to view and experience much of the battlefield, including Last Stand Hill, from its location. Commenters also felt that if a new visitor center was built in a location further away, some visitors may only spend time to visit the Visitor Center and its exhibits and not take time to visit the rest of the monument. Commenters suggested that if the visitor center were to be rebuilt on its current

location, impacts on the landscape could be minimized by making the building blend with the natural features of the landscape and/or be constructed partially underground.

Build a new visitor center and museum storage facility in a new location

Some commenters expressed general support for building a visitor center and museum storage facility in a new location, without providing specific details regarding the site selection. They supported this idea for a number of reasons, including protection of the monument's cultural landscape, enhancement of the visitor experience, increased Americans with Disabilities Act accessibility, ability to build a larger facility that could better accommodate the park's administrative and museum storage needs, and to better integrate the new facility into the park environs and minimize environmental impact. In addition to these comments, other commenters provided additional details as to where and how the new visitor center and museum storage facility should be constructed. These comments are below.

- **Build a new visitor center and museum storage facility in the Garryowen area or near Reno Creek Road**

Commenters supported construction of a new visitor center and museum storage facility at, or near, locations proposed by the 1986 general management plan. This location could be west of Interstate 90 in the vicinity of the Garryowen area near the interstate overpass, on the west side of the Little Bighorn River across the interstate on the old Denny property, or further to the south near Reno Creek Road with the construction of a new Montana Department of Transportation interchange from Interstate 90. Commenters feel that these areas provide a complete and comprehensive view of the battlefield from the first skirmish line to Last Stand Hill, including Sitting Bull's Hunkpapa encampment, Crow's Nest, the Reno-Benteen Battlefield, the Reno Hospital area, Weir Point, and Last Stand Hill. This location could help visitors better experience the battle chronologically.

This location could also help alleviate traffic congestion and safety problems, through the construction of a one-way road from the new

visitor center location to the Reno-Benteen Battlefield and north to Last Stand Hill, exiting past the present site of the visitor center and administrative facilities. Partnerships with the Crow Tribe, tribal members, the Custer Battlefield Preservation Committee, and other private entities would be necessary to negotiate and complete this project. Commenters suggest that this could entail building less than 2–3 miles of roadway and one bridge over Reno Creek. These additional road segments would also create an alternate route for emergency evacuations.

Additionally, the commenters suggest that in addition to stimulating economic development in the Garryowen area, this change would not adversely impact businesses already located near the US Highway 212 interchange, as visitors would still exit the park through that location.

- **Build a new visitor center and museum storage facility as part of the proposed Montana Department of Transportation "battlefield rest area"**

Some commenters suggested building a new visitor center and museum storage facility in conjunction with the proposed Montana Department of Transportation intergovernmental "battlefield rest area." This proposed complex would be located on the north side of Highway 212, near the intersection with Battlefield Road. It was noted by commenters that this option would pose a variety of administrative, financial, partnership, and perhaps legislative challenges to be resolved before moving forward. This location is just north of the site identified in the 1995 GMP update.

- **Build a new visitor center and museum storage facility in the monument's administrative and housing area, or remodel some of the existing infrastructure in the administrative and housing area to include space for these purposes**

Commenters suggested building a new visitor center and museum storage facility in the monument's housing area, if space permits, or

remodeling some of the existing infrastructure in the administrative and housing area to include space for these purposes. One example given was to build a basement underneath the existing administrative building to accommodate the museum collections. Other commenters felt that this may still negatively impact the cultural landscape and the viewshed from important areas within the park.

- **Build separate new facilities for the visitor center and museum storage facility**

Commenters suggested constructing two separate facilities for the visitor center and museum storage facility, as they serve different purposes and some items may have ethnographic importance that would be compromised by being under the same roof as the visitor center. Another idea proposed was to have both purposes served by a single building, with the visitor center on one floor and the museum storage facility on another story that would not be open to the public.

Protection and return of museum and archival collections

Commenters widely supported the need to return the museum and archival collections to the monument and to house it within a secure, adequately sized, and climate-controlled storage facility. Commenters expressed that this should be stated as a main goal of the plan. Commenters expressed that the return of the collections is vitally important to many stakeholders, and would better facilitate the visitor experience, education and interpretation, and scholarly research. Some commenters felt that the museum storage facility could be managed in collaboration with partners, either through leasing space from others or sharing whatever space the National Park Service acquired with partners. Another commenter noted that a research library should be collocated with the collections in order to facilitate further scholarship.

Visitor experience

Commenters expressed the need for a heightened visitor experience at the monument. Specific suggestions included making sure the visitor center has adequate space for interpretive exhibits, educational programs, and for viewing the interpretive film; increased accessibility; and involvement of partners and educators to assist with plans for the visitor center to ensure that all stories are told and needs are met.

Transportation

Commenters noted the current parking, congestion, and traffic flow problems the monument faces. Some commenters offered suggestions to help alleviate some of these problems, including the use of alternative transportation system (i.e., trams) to move visitors through the park; the creation of a one-way road from the new visitor center location to the Reno-Benteen Battlefield and north to Last Stand Hill, exiting past the present site of the visitor center and administrative facilities; paving the tour road to standard width; and enlarged parking areas and increased pullouts.

Boundary expansion / purchase of private parcels on which the battlefield was fought

Some commenters supported pursuing congressional action for a boundary expansion of the monument to include all the land on which the battle was fought, and subsequent purchase or transfer of private parcels within this boundary to the National Park Service. This would include close collaboration with the Custer Battlefield Preservation Committee, the Crow Tribe, and other private parties.

Economics

Commenters expressed the importance of the monument as an economic driver in the area, both as its own destination and as an important stop between Mount Rushmore National Memorial and Yellowstone National Park. Commenters noted that initial costs associated with improvements to the visitor center and museum storage facility would be offset by increased business and tourism tax incomes. Some commenters suggested additional tourist infrastructure to be built nearby to better accommodate visitors.

Partnerships, fundraising, staffing

Commenters expressed the critical role of partnerships in both the planning and implementation of the amendment to the general management plan. Partnerships with tribal entities, other federal and state agencies, nonprofits, educational institutions, and private groups and individuals should be welcomed and cultivated as part of this process.

Outside of scope

Commenters suggested a number of ideas that are outside the scope of this plan, but will be carefully reviewed by NPS staff for consideration in future planning and management efforts. These ideas include partnering with businesses and hotels for increased tourism infrastructure outside the park, the elimination of permitting of livestock grazing on non-NPS parcels, and the creation of pastures for wild horses and/or bison on non-NPS land.

Process of GMP amendment

One commenter requested inclusion of costs and spatial requirements for all alternatives. Another commenter requested additional information regarding the NPS project funding for fiscal year 2016 to rehabilitate, but not expand, the existing visitor center, and how that influences this planning process. The planning team will ensure that this information is included in the general management plan amendment for clarity.

NEXT STEPS

Completing the general management plan amendment will require ongoing consultation and coordination with the many entities involved in planning and implementation. Therefore, this planning process has and will continue to emphasize open and inclusive communication to engage the public and understand their desires and concerns. See the table below for an overall timeline for this process.

Following the conclusion of this public comment period, NPS staff will use the input gathered to carefully develop alternatives and prepare draft general management plan amendment / environmental assessment. As planning continues, the planning website will continue to be updated. To see these updates and to find more information on the project, please see <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/LIBI>. The public will also be notified through a number of different means when the draft general management plan amendment is available for public review. The National Park Service expects this public review process to begin late 2015. Please stay tuned!

Project Schedule

Planning Step	When?
Initiate project and conduct formal public scoping	October–December 2014
Prepare preliminary alternatives	December 2014–May 2015
Update public about preliminary alternatives	May–June 2015
Prepare draft plan / environmental assessment	May–November 2015
Release plan / environmental assessment to public for formal public comment	November 2015
Prepare and sign decision document	March 2016

