

Thursday June 10, 2010

Yellowstone winter-use policies pitched

By CLARK CORBIN ccorbin@postregister.com

A business organization seeking to strengthen the economic viability of communities and companies situated near Yellowstone National Park has proposed ideas to expand winter use in the park.

Officials with the Yellowstone Business Partnership and 85 attendees at last month's Re-Envisioning Winter conference in Grand Teton National Park explored the idea of plowing some of Yellowstone's lower-elevation roads during winter months, opening the park to more off-season visitors.

Presently, many of the park's roads are not plowed during the winter, which limits access to points of interest in the park and to smaller communities situated outside Yellowstone and Grand Teton.

Only the park's north entrance, at Gardiner, Mont., remains open throughout the year.

Plowing low-elevation roads could open the country's first national park to additional visitors who are uninterested or unable to travel by snowcoach or snowmobile, said Jan Brown, the Yellowstone Business Partnership's executive director.

Although allowing private vehicles to enter the park in the winter was discussed during the conference, Brown specifically explored the concept of allowing only low-emission buses to enter the park if a decision is made to plow some roads.

"(The winter limitations) mean that approximately one-fourth of the time Yellowstone is not open and serving the public," Brown said. "My question is, is that in the best interest of the region or necessary for (protecting) resources? Is it a budget-driven decision or should it be?"

Brown said she and other attendees shared the concept with David Jacob, a National Park Service employee who is working on a new Environmental Impact Statement study that would help define winter policy in Yellowstone beginning in late 2011.

Efforts to reach Jacob for comment failed, and Yellowstone spokesman Al Nash was in meetings this week and could not be reached.

In conjunction with plowing roads, Yellowstone Business Partnership officials are researching the possible impacts and benefits of allowing people to travel through the park via the Linx Transportation Co-op.

The co-op will be designed to link existing transportation providers, such as the Salt Lake Express and Targhee Regional Public Transportation Authority, to allow riders to travel between 27 Idaho, Wyoming and Montana counties on a single reservation.

The co-op was incorporated in January and is expected to be available to the public this summer.

Brown said Jacob will review winter-use proposals discussed during the conference and announce a public comment period on the impact statement and winter policy before the rules are set in place next year.

Yellowstone Business Partnership officials said benefits of expanding winter travel in the park could include the creation of additional year-round jobs and a greater influx of tourist dollars to small towns near the park.

"We brought a lot people together to start great discussion, but, if this is typical of YBP, it is not going to end there," Yellowstone Business Partnership Communications Specialist Kim Billimoria said. "Ideas will take root and then take flight."
