

Lodge, campground OK'd at Mount St. Helens

By TOM BANSE
Northwest News Network

The U.S. Forest Service has OK'd a plan to develop what would be the first overnight tourist facilities within the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument, including camping, cabins and a lodge.

The lodge complex and outdoor school are the vision of the Mount St. Helens Institute, a Clark County, Washington-based educational nonprofit. Institute executive director Ray Yurkewycz said the idea for overnight lodging — and the demand — has been around for a long time.

“If you look at any other similar public land site throughout the Pacific Northwest, there are opportunities to stay longer and engage. And that’s an important thing,” Yurkewycz said.

“You know, it’s one thing to come for a few hours and go to the visitor center, do a hike and go home. It’s another thing to stay overnight — for kids especially, but all visitors,” he continued.

The Forest Service in late April signed off on a phased 30-year permit for the Mount St. Helens Institute to remodel the existing Coldwater Ridge Visitor Center and add a trio of 10-room lodge buildings, a cluster of cabins and a 40-space campground. These would be arrayed on and around Coldwater’s vast, nearly empty parking lot. The renovated visitor center would include a new cafe and bookstore, along with meeting and classroom spaces.

“The infrastructure is already there,” Yurkewycz said. “This is not new disturbance.”

Once detailed design and engineering is completed, the Forest Service plans to do further environmental analysis. A Gifford Pinchot National Forest spokesperson said the public will have a chance to provide input



Artist rendering of the planned Mount St. Helens Institute lodge and outdoor school campus on the site of the former Coldwater Ridge Visitor Center. Hennebery Eddy Architects

during that process. The Coldwater Ridge center is in the blast zone about 7 miles as the crow flies from the crater of Mount St. Helens.

Yurkewycz said the estimated \$35 million construction cost still needs to be raised from public and private sources. That means the grand opening is probably around five years away.

“Partnerships such as this strengthen our conservation education programming while benefiting local communities,” Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument Ranger Rebecca Hoffman said in a prepared statement. “The Forest’s decision to issue these 30-year operating permits to Mount St. Helens Insti-

tute is a result of our confidence in the institute’s vision and due diligence.”

There are lots of RV camping and lodging options available in gateway communities such as Castle Rock, Kelso, the Cowlitz River Valley and Cougar, Washington. But from those places, volcano visitors generally need to drive an hour to the prime viewpoints and trailheads inside the national monument. Backcountry camping is possible seasonally on the fringes of the national monument.

In late March, the Cowlitz County Board of Commissioners signed a letter of support for the lodge complex.

“Since its 1980 eruption,

public access to Mount St. Helens has been steadily decreasing; yet fewer than 40 miles away, visits to Mt. Rainier are increasing steadily,” the commissioners’ letter stated. “We believe that MSHI’s Lodge & Education Center will provide expanded access to the monument, thus tapping into a growing market for overnight accommodations and amenities in places of interest. We believe that outdoor recreation tourism is an important driver of economic diversification which will enable Cowlitz County to grow long-term as demand for outdoor recreation opportunities surges.”

The existing Coldwater Ridge Visitor Center

was built in 1993 and later closed by the Forest Service in 2007 due to high maintenance costs and staffing limitations. Nowadays, most visitors head straight to the Johnston Ridge Observatory, a day-use visitor center located a short drive away at the end of the Spirit Lake Memorial Highway. However, Johnston Ridge is closed approximately half of each year due to snow. Coldwater Ridge is accessible nearly year-round.

The Mount St. Helens Institute reopened the Coldwater visitor center in 2012 under a renewable lease to run science and outdoor education programs for youth — mainly day programs, but with limited overnight school

usage, too. Forest Service rangers sometimes staff the facility on weekends to answer visitor questions.

Yurkewycz said he anticipated shared, alternating occupancy of the future lodge complex by school groups and the general public during the spring and fall school field trip seasons.

“We envision the facility being dedicated just to (outdoor school) Monday nights through Thursday nights in those months and then weekends could be available to other visitors,” Yurkewycz said.

Summertime could be a mix of youth camps, school and general public reservations. Wintertime might be chiefly open to tourists and recreationists, he said.

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Q K D D : T J I D Z G S W J E W L K .
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5-10 CRYPTOQUIP

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