TOWN COUNCIL STAFF REPORT

Subject: Additional Measures to Manage and Mitigate Summer Tourism Impacts for 2021

Meeting Date: April 7, 2021

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RECOMMENDATION:

Staff will provide a presentation of staff options and recommendations to provide measures to manage and mitigate visitor impacts for the 2021 spring/summer/fall season. The proposed programs extend across the current fiscal year into next fiscal year. Staff is recommending that the Council take the following actions:

1. Authorize the Town Manager to make the following budget adjustments and work program changes for FY20-21 and FY21-22 including:
   - Hire two part-time Parks Division Employees
   - Hire a full-time Code Enforcement/Community Services Officer
   - Allocate $10,000 for additional porta-toilets and trash services
   - Allocate up to $200,000 in transit reserves for enhanced/subsidized services
   - Support the use of Mammoth Lakes Tourism Funding for the Host Program
   - Support Mammoth Lakes Tourism Marketing program
   - Support Mammoth Lakes Recreation's ongoing Adopt-a-Trail program
   - Bring back to Town Council options to improve expanded parking areas in the Lakes Basin and options to address "Van Life" parking and services.

BACKGROUND:

The summer of 2020 saw significant increases in visitation to Mammoth Lakes, Mono County, and the surrounding region. The impacts of this tourism influx were unmanageable in many respects and had a negative impact on the environment. Cases of unmanaged fires, illegal camping, trash, human waste, and overuse of popular destinations were regular complaints and Facebook posts. There were a number stop gap measures implemented in an attempt to react to the surge of tourism. Staff is recommending building off of the measures that were successful and is recommending new opportunities that may provide additional mitigation.

ANALYSIS:

The following menu of programs and management options are intended to directly mitigate the expected surge of tourism. Many of these proposals are experimental and are not based on quantifiable data, but rather are based on a general understanding of the problem and a

desire to try and provide solutions. The low snow year will place additional strain on summer tourism as access to front and back country sites will occur sooner than in previous years. Staff believes the first true test may come with the April 24 fishing opener. While we have a few weeks prior to this date, we need to plan and be prepared for an early Lakes Basin opening to accommodate the opener now.

1. Provide Enhanced Temporary Restrooms and Trash Service.

Since 2015 the Town has supplemented USFS trash and restroom facilities to varying degrees. The timing and locations of facilities have varied over the years but have always served the highest demand areas. For 2021 Staff is again recommending facilities be placed in high use areas. Staff recommends implementing these facilities as soon as weather permits. Many of these facilities have historically been located in the Lakes Basin; however, with impacts at other Mammoth Destinations it is recommended that the program be expanded to serve locations at Sherwin Trail Head and Inyo Craters.

As part of the TOML/USFS Snow Pit agreement TOML has agreed to contribute the value of the land lease and a 5% use fee to supporting USFS facilities. The projected funding commitment is estimated at $40,000. The Town is proposing the use of two part-time parks workers to support the regular cleaning of restrooms and trash removal in the Lakes Basin and other high use areas (see list below). The two employees will be hired at different times in order to overlap services between mid-May into mid-October. This will provide at least one worker in the spring and fall and two during peak summer months. The Program also provides some overlap work in Town parks and other high use areas as time allows. The Inyo National Forest will provide a vehicle for use this summer.

TOML Part-time Staffing/Supplies Budget $32,000
Contractual Services Budget $10,000
Source of Funds: General Fund

Initial Restroom/Trash Service Sites
Earthquake Fault
Minaret Vista
Twin Lakes Picnic Area
Lake Mary
Horseshoe Lake
Lake George
Lake Mamie
Emerald Lake Trailhead
Duck Pass Trailhead

In addition to providing these services staff is prepared to assist with snow clearing, minor maintenance of road and other damaged public facilities and signs as part of the opening process similar to services previously provided. Costs are part of operating budgets, with time and materials used tracked for reporting purposes.

2. Host Program / Adopt-a-Trail Program

Proposed FY21-22 Budget for full coverage (seven days a week at the proposed locations) will cost about $420,000.00. The proposal is to look at a reduced program using current budgeted funds and Mammoth Lakes Tourism (MLT) funding. The final structure of the host program will be based on available funding. MLT has committed $100,000 for the program. Depending on other funding and use of volunteers as well as paid hosts the program will be designed to address high impact locations. Host shifts are variable, and locations and needs can change due to many factors including weather, snow levels and COVID protocols. The program is scalable and can adapt relative to the amount of visitation (funding stream). A fully staffed program would support the following locations.

Locations for Program Consideration

Area	Locations
Town Hubs (year-round)	1_The Village 2_Shopping Centers 3_Town Buses
Trail Hubs (Winter – when grooming is in effect)	1_Shady Rest Park 2_Sherwins Trailhead 3_Lake Mary Road Closure
Lakes Basin (Spring/Summer)	1_Horseshoe Lake Trailhead 2_Coldwater Trailhead 3_Lake George 4_Twin Lakes 5_Bike Rover
Trail Hubs (Spring/Summer/Fall)	1_Shady Rest Park 2_Mammoth Creek Park/Sherwins Trailhead 3_Minaret Vista 4_Bike Town Loop

Adopt-a-Trail

The Adopt-a-Trail program is being managed under Mammoth Lakes Recreation (MLR) and is developing a good base of volunteers. The program provides basic support (trail assignments, supplies, coordination, etc.) for those who adopt a trail to provide trash cleanup and other minor assistance. MLR also engages with other cleanup efforts, providing information, volunteer support and assistance. Measure R provides administrative funds to support the program through MLR. Funding from the Adopt-a-Trail participants also provides direct support for the program.

3. Enhanced Transit

It is anticipated that COVID restrictions will continue to impact transit service throughout Town. The impact of which is hard to decern within the ever-changing regulatory framework. The Town should be prepared to quickly respond to demand and deploy service to meet demand. This creates a unique set of staffing and budget challenges. Staff is working with the Eastern Sierra Transit Authority (ESTA) to try and prepare enhanced service plans for this summer. It is anticipated that we will see higher than normal visitation in the Lakes Basin.

In preparation for this Staff is evaluating the following transit service changes. The first is to provide a new Lakes Basin Shuttle that will run solely within the Lakes Basin. New stops will be added at popular destinations and campgrounds. The idea is to reduce the number of cars circulating in the Basin. Visitors already in the Basin at campgrounds will not need to drive to other destinations. Visitors who have a parking space will also be able to visit other locations. The goal is to reduce trips within the Basin with transit. This new service will require consistent service to be successful and coordination with ESTA and USFS. Staff also recommends increasing the number of Lakes Basin Trolleys running on weekends and holidays. ESTA and the Town have coordinated these changes in the past with success. The Town pays a set rate of $47.47/hour for service. These additional services would cost upwards of $50,000 for the season.

Budget $50,000
Source of Funds: Transit Reserves

4. Supplemental Reds Meadow Operating Costs

COVID -19 protocols have reduced the capacity of the Reds Meadow shuttle. The capacity of the shuttle was reduced from 55 passenger to 18 per trip. An average trip has 34 passengers. Because of these restrictions ESTA could not afford to operate as every shuttle trip would have operated at a loss. In response the USFS added some additional measures to manage access to the valley. The result was longer waits and large vehicle cues both of which negatively impacted the visitor experience. For 2021 it is recommended that the Reds Shuttle be operated to manage tourism as close to previous years as possible. Not knowing the nature of the COVID restrictions that will be in place for transit this summer it is hard to accurately plan. It is possible that the capacity of the bus will still be required to be reduced.

If this is the case the shuttle will need to be subsidized and the number of tickets restricted. Restricting the number of tickets will help to reduce the number of buses required to bring visitors out of the valley at the end of the day. This exodus is where ESTA generally sees the largest gatherings and bottlenecks. There are many unknows and variables with this proposal. The environment is dynamic and so staff is proposing a conservative estimate in order to manage this variability. It is estimated at this time that shuttle service may be needed for Memorial Day weekend, with regular service beginning a few weeks after.

Service often runs well into September. In order to make the Reds Shuttle economically viable ESTA is proposing a rate increase to $15/ adult from $10 and $7/ child from $5. This will mitigate a portion of the projected financial impact and may limit some ridership. Even with the proposed fare increase an additional subsidy of up to $150,000 is estimated to provide ESTA the resources to at least break even on operations.

Budget $150,000
Source of Funds: Transit Reserves

5. Overflow Parking / Parking Management

The Lakes Basin has a finite number of parking spaces and the number of visitors regularly exceeds capacity in the summer. TOML and USFS Staff are exploring options to add some parking in the Horseshoe Lake equestrian staging areas that may be used for overflow parking. This will require additional review and analysis to determine viability and process to use the area for this purpose. The goal is to look at ways coupled with enhanced transit service to provide a place for the PD and Hosts to direct visitors to park during peak times. The site may require cleanup and smoothing out in order to make it accessible to low clearance vehicles and any efforts will need to be authorized by the Forest Service.

In conjunction with enhanced transit service and routes, other overflow parking locations could include the Old Mammoth Road Park n' Ride lot or Eagle Lodge with MMSA approval. Staff is also evaluating increasing the number of signs and parking barriers to help minimize the "bandit" parking that occurs all around the Lakes Basin. This will require additional management and support from Public Works but may help to alleviate environmental impacts to over-use areas.

Budget: Unknown pending approvals to use all or portion of site
Source of Funds: General Fund

6. Code Enforcement

The past year demonstrated a need for an enhanced level of code enforcement. This includes providing information, roadway assistance, parking management, addressing illegal camping and campfires, assisting with animal control (domestic and wildlife), and trash management. The recommendation is to provide a new full-time Police Department managed code enforcement/community service officer. Due to staffing changes in the Police Department, there will be no additional costs for FY21-22 Budget.

Budget $130,000 (est.)
Source of Funds: General Fund

7. Enhanced Visitor Information and Education Materials

Staff is working with Mammoth Lakes Tourism on their marketing plan. MLT will continue to focus on responsible travel messages and related messages to encourage visitors to recreate responsibility. Efforts to provide information and educational materials will continue. The level of direct marketing for the coming season will be limited.

MLT Responsible Travel Efforts – Summer/Fall 2021 will incorporate:

- Drive-market advertising and content plan to California and Nevada Outdoor Adventurers focused on sustainability and outdoor etiquette
- Care for Mammoth Lakes video for spring 21
- Hug What You Love in Mammoth Lakes video campaign – summer/fall
- Local, in-market ad campaign (print/radio/paid social)
- Continue to promote and drive to The Mammoth Promise (www.mammothpromise.com) to encourage visitors and locals to take the "pledge"
- Develop activity-based interactive map to help spread visitors to less congested areas in the county
- In-Town signage to encourage #recreateresponsibly and the Mammoth Promise
- Continue developing web and blog content to educate visitors
- Promote any and all Eastern Sierra community clean-up events via VisitMammoth.com/events

Funding for the above effort is part of MLT's budget.

8. Dispersed Camping

The level of dispersed camping in the previous year created a substantial amount of discussion. Concerns were raised related to open fires, trash, and location of camp sites. In addition to general dispersed camping, the growing 'van-life' movement has impacted Mammoth Lakes. There is no legal dispersed camping permitted within the Town Boundaries. However, these restrictions have not stopped illegal overnight camping in the forest, local parks, and even the Vons parking lot as well as other public and private lots. There is no doubt that we will see additional impacts from this movement this summer. The 'van life' movement takes a different approach to the traditional dispersed camper. It is not unusual to find vehicles parked in parking lots vs. camp sites on forest or BLM lands. While dispersing into the forest does happen, we are seeing increased overnight stays in regular parking lots.

In order to try and inform these visitors on camping (overnight parking) it is recommended that additional signage be placed at Town Parks and other Facilities and that enforcement efforts be increased. Staff cannot implement such measures on private property but recommends concerned businesses contact Staff to investigate options. A discussion for Town Council is whether or not we should investigate the development of an overnight lot that could be utilized for campers unwilling to pay for a site. Of course, this action likely

brings with it additional restroom and trash management needs. Staff will also reach out to the Forest Service for ideas to address this need and see if there are low/no fee options. Acknowledging the issue and finding a way to manage it may be a better solution than chasing the illegal activity.

Budget: TBD
Source of Funds: TBD

FINANCIAL AND STAFFING CONSIDERATIONS:

The proposed funding for each of the defined areas is noted above and is summarized in the following table. The funds noted here are in addition to existing budgeted amounts that may be programed to assist with the mitigation and management related to early opening and late closing of areas and other past support provided by the Town. As noted above, the agreement for the Snow Pit use requires the Town to reinvest the amounts that would have been paid to the Forest Service into programs and services that benefit the visitors to the forest. This amount is estimated at $40,000. These funds will support two part-time park employees, fees for porta-toilets and trash services. An additional full-time Code Enforcement/Community Services Officer is recommended, with funding to come from savings within the Police Department. Funding for expanded transit services and subsidies of up to $200,000 is recommended to come from transit reserves within the General Fund. Funding for marketing and the $100,000 for an expanded Host Program will come from MLT's operating budget. No final programs or costs have been identified at this time to provide overflow parking in the Lakes Basin or to assist with dispersed camping. As programs are defined specific requests will be brought forward.

Program Summary Table		
Program	**Budget**	**Source of Funds**
Provide Enhanced Temporary Restrooms and Trash Service	$40,000	Gen. Fund
Host Program	$100,000	MLT
Enhanced Lakes Basin Transit	$ 50,000	Transit Reserves
Reds Meadow Shuttle Service	$150,000	Transit Reserves
Overflow Parking	TBD	General Fund
Code Enforcement	$130,000	Gen. Fund
Enhanced Visitor Information and Education Materials	TBD	MLT
Overflow Parking	TBD	General Fund
Dispersed Camping	TBD	