

Evolution of Grand Teton's Wireless Infrastructure

A Chronology

March 2019

September 17, 2001: Acting Superintendent Steven P. Iobst declares in a memo that the park has “determined that a wireless telecommunication facility in any Class III, IV, V, or VI area” of the park would represent an “unavoidable direct conflict” with the NPS mission or the current or planned use of the property, as described in Section 704(c) of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Only Class I and II areas would be open to WTFs.

This land classification system at Grand Teton comes from the park's 1976 Master Plan:

- Class I: High Density Recreation
- Class II: General Outdoor Recreation
- Class III: Natural Environment
- Class IV: Outstanding Natural
- Class V: Primitive
- Class VI: Historical

(Grand Teton may be the only national park in the country to have made a determination as to where WTFs can be placed, and where they must not be placed to be consistent with the Telecommunications Act of 1996.)

2011 and 2012: Grand Teton issues press releases on the status of the effort to reduce roadkill in the park, noting on February 2, 2012 that they collect “comprehensive data on the number of wildlife-vehicle collisions (WVCs) that occur on park roads. The park had previously identified “distracted drivers” as a factor in WVCs. The press release adds that “park managers plan to implement new prevention measures in an effort to reverse the recent trend in animal deaths from vehicle collisions.”

August 2013: Grand Teton and Yellowstone form a “multipark workgroup” on the topic of telecommunications.

October 30, 2013: Grand Teton and Yellowstone officials meet to discuss “extending fiber optic and cellular infrastructure” in the two parks.

January 27, 2014: Grand Teton issues a “Request for Information” to “Wireless Telecommunications Carriers” regarding the availability and feasibility of expanding cellular and broadband access to specified locations within Grand Teton National Park and John D. Rockefeller Memorial Parkway. The request states that “Wireless services coverage in GRTE/JODR is required ONLY (*emphasis original*) for specified locations, and should use best available technology to provide coverage using unobtrusive infrastructure appropriate for a national park renowned for its scenic landscapes.”

October 10, 2014: Diamond Communications responds with a “Letter of Intent” to initiate a request for use of park land for a buried fiber optic cable and 13 proposed wireless

telecommunications facilities. One NPS employee, Chris Finlay, hears of the telecom proposal and writes, “This is very exciting news for the park, our employees, residents, visitors and concessioners...”

January 2015: Diamond submits an elaborate SF-299 application for the proposed telecom facilities. The estimated cost of the project exceeds \$10 million.

March 9, 2015: Yellowstone’s Branch Chief for Technology Services, Bret DeYoung, commenting on Diamond’s proposal for Grand Teton, writes: “Wow. We can’t get anyone to provide financial support for fiber in YELL...”

March 20, 2015: Rusty Mizelle, Chief of Project Management at Grand Teton, warns Diamond in an e-mail that “Verizon is pushing buttons in our Regional headquarters, and they also have SF-299s in front of yours for Kelly and Moose.”

April 27, 2015: Grand Teton’s “Interdisciplinary Team” meets to discuss Diamond’s SF-299.

June 8, 2015: Grand Teton’s planner writes that the park has just “had our kick-off meeting for the upcoming Telecommunications Plan EA.”

July 1, 2015: Grand Teton drafts the “compliance requirements” for its telecom Environmental Assessment (EA), stating that the plan must be consistent with “the NPS mission, Grand Teton National Park enabling legislation, existing park management documents, and future planning considerations.”

The “Compliance Requirements” state that the EA should include any telecommunications infrastructure the park anticipates “within the next 20+ years.”

July 24, 2015: Kelly Green, a consultant with the Northwind Group, takes issue with the notion of producing a telecom plan for 20+ years: “[A]nticipating future designs, potential locations, appropriateness of facilities, and park needs for the next 20+ years seems very untenable, especially given how fast this technology changes.”

October 21, 2015: Notes from a Conference call mention that Goldman Sachs has some role in funding this project. No specifics are given.

April 12, 2016: Grand Teton asks Diamond to pay \$32,000 for “government in-house costs” to date for the telecom project.

July 1, 2016: Rusty Mizelle, Grand Teton’s Chief of Project Management, states that “[w]hen they formally start the EA process, we will need to start thinking about public messaging.”

July 8, 2016: Grand Teton issues a Categorical Exclusion to allow AT&T Mobility to install a temporary Cell on Wheels (COW) facility within the Moose Headquarters Complex. D4 is the categorical exclusion chosen:

“Issuance of permits for demonstrations, gathering, ceremonies, concerts, arts and crafts shows, etc. entailing only short-term or readily mitigable environmental disturbance.”

The CE is signed on behalf of Park Superintendent David Vela, who avers that “I find the action fits within the categorical exclusion above. Therefore, I am categorically excluding the described project from further NEPA analysis.”

August 30, 2016: Grand Teton’s Rusty Mizelle announces that “we are kicking off the EA on 15 September.” The public will not be told about the ongoing EA until June 2017.

November 7, 2016: Grand Teton planner Margaret Wilson e-mails a co-worker about whether the park missed a deadline to place a notice in the Federal Register for the upcoming telecom EA:

“Good and bad news. Good news is we didn’t miss required deadline. Bad news is, we normally do not do a Federal Register Notice for EAs and although it is getting more electronic and easier, they are still a drag.”

June 12, 2017: Grand Teton issues an Appraisal Report, describing its request for an appraisal of the proposed telecom project. The Appraisal Report warns:

“This is an extremely complicated project and care must be taken to consider the time and effort required to collect and analyze the data that will be necessary to provide a credible report.”

June 14, 2017: Grand Teton informs the public in a press release that it is “developing an environmental assessment to address existing and future telecommunications services within developed areas of the park...” A four-page scoping newsletter (titled “Telecommunications Infrastructure Plan and Environmental Assessment Scoping”) accompanies the press release. The newsletter states that the park is seeking to meet its “telecommunications needs of the next 20+ years while protecting the park’s resources and responding to visitor expectations.”

June 27, 2017: PEER files a Freedom of Information Act request with Grand Teton, seeking more detailed information on the telecom proposal being considered.

June 29, 2017: PEER writes to Grand Teton’s Superintendent David Vela, expressing concern about the “process being employed” by the park in developing its telecommunications infrastructure plan. Vela does not respond to the letter.

July 28, 2017: Andrew White, Assistant Public Affairs Officer at Grand Teton, responds to PEER’s FOIA request by stating that it falls within the “complex processing track.” Such requests are handled “in twenty-one to sixty workdays.”

September 25, 2017: Mr. White sends PEER a letter stating that, “At this time we are unable to dispatch a determination to you.”

March 22, 2018: PEER files a lawsuit in the United State District Court for the District of Columbia to compel Grand Teton National Park to disclose the records requested under FOIA on June 27, 2017. PEER simultaneously issues a press release titled, “Grand Teton Stealth Plan for 11 New Cell Towers.”

March 23, 2018: The Associated Press publishes a news story on the PEER lawsuit titled, “Group: Public in Dark About Cell Tower Plans in Grand Teton.”

April 18, 2018: Grand Teton begins its release of responsive documents to PEER. Some of the documents released by the park are completely redacted, others partially redacted. No documents are provided after June 30, 2017. One “particular draft” document was withheld, according to Grand Teton’s lawyers, “to protect against public confusion that could result from disclosure of reasons and rationales that were not in fact ultimately the grounds for NPS’ plan to improve telecommunication infrastructure in the park.”

March 2019: Grand Teton releases its “Telecommunications Infrastructure Plan and Environmental Assessment.” The public comment period ends April 10, 2019.

March 13, 2019: The Associated Press publishes a news story titled, “Grand Teton National Park pursuing disputed cell-tower build.”

March 25, 2019: PEER files a Freedom of Information Act request with Grand Teton, requesting the latest records relating to the telecom proposal at the park.

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