

September 2012 Newsletter

National Park Hospitality Association

NPHA Urges NPS to Adopt Clear National Strategy on Cell and Internet Connectivity in Parks

NPHA has called upon the Director of the National Park Service to issue a Director's Order defining a clear national strategy on cell and internet connectivity in parks. The policy has been sent to the Director and was also presented to the NPS Concessions Management Advisory Board during its September 18 meeting in Shenandoah National Park. NPHA also released the results of its survey of cell and internet service at key parks, demonstrating widespread poor service in parks.

NPHA noted that we live in a world where connectivity via smartphones is highly valued. Economists have projected that the sale of millions of new iPhone 5's over the next 90 days will boost the US GDP $\frac{1}{2}$ of 1% for the entire year. Smartphones go everywhere with Americans – and with people around the globe, including those who visit our nation. But in many of America's national parks, these prized smartphones are little more than cameras because cell and data service, even at visitor centers and lodges and other developed sites, is poor – or worse.

Poor connectivity is especially relevant as the National Park Service and its partners, including concessioners, seek to invite all Americans and more international visitors to visit and experience the natural, historic and cultural treasures managed by the National Park Service. Many of these nontraditional visitors will not find poor cell and data service understandable or attractive – and in fact it may be an irritant that adversely shapes memories of a park visit. Poor service will also handicap NPS and partner efforts to harness smartphones as a means to deliver interpretation and other important information to park visitors.

NPHA has noted issues to consider, including mitigation of the visual impacts of added service and whether Wilderness and some other areas should be "off-limits" to this kind of connectivity, although even there, SOS-level communication might save lives and reduce the challenges of search and rescue operations. NPHA noted that the amount of data downloaded and uploaded can be controlled – noting that it is not NPHA's desire to encourage park visitors to watch movies in their lodge rooms and tents.

Yet technology is available to deliver acceptable cell service and internet access in defined portions of America's distant parks – along key roads and where visitor services are now found. With some education of visitors, this limited access can permit the downloading of valuable information – trail maps and more – that can be used in portions of the park without service, since GPS does not require cell or data connection.

The current response by national parks is inconsistent and the debate about access and connectivity is going on across the nation with incomplete information. Inaction could mean that valuable opportunities to shape access to phone and internet will be lost permanently – for example, concessioner-provided access could allow free access for basic levels of use and fees for higher usage and could welcome those signing in with quick links to NPS, friends alliance and concessioner websites with visitor information.

The NPS Concessions Management Advisory Board gave its full support to NPHA's proposal. The next step will include gathering technology experts, park interpretive interests and other key parts of the parks community to explore the issue and available alternatives. An important first step will take place at Grand Thoughts at the Grand Canyon, where senior representatives of Verizon Wireless and ViaSat will join NPHA and NPS for conversations.