Purpose and Need for the Plan

Rapid growth in day-use visitation and changing use patterns in the park have degraded natural and cultural resources, diminished the quality of the visitor experience, increased negative impacts to visitor and staff safety, and created a heavy strain on the park's facilities and the ability to perform daily operations. This plan is needed to provide day-use visitor access in a way that protects and enhances the fundamental resources and values for which the park was designated and that creates opportunities for high-quality visitor experiences.

In 2010, Rocky Mountain National Park had a few more than 3 million visitors. Starting during the park's centennial in 2015, visitation began rapidly increasing, to a peak of 4.6 million visits in 2019. In 2020, the park was closed for two months and then reopened with the first timed entry system pilot to manage visitation and maintain public health and safety during the Coronavirus pandemic. In 2021, visitation increased to 4.4 million visits and was managed under a modified pilot timed-entry permit system (TEPS 2). Although visitation remained high during the 2021 pilot timed entry system, use was spread throughout the day.

In summer 2021, we invited you to join us in envisioning the long-term future of day-use visitor access at Rocky Mountain National Park. Your feedback was instrumental in helping National Park Service staff develop the preliminary management strategies represented below, using a similar process to what has been used in other parks across the National Park Service. We have outlined ideas for different strategies to help the National Park Service protect the park's natural and cultural resources and values while providing for high-quality visitor experiences for today's visitors and future generations.

Do you have ideas on how we can accomplish these goals? We want to hear from you!

During the comment period, we are most interested in hearing from you about the following:

- **Based on your desired experiences and protection of the natural and cultural resources at Rocky Mountain National Park, which of the ideas (or combination of ideas) do you think best achieve the purpose of the plan?**
- **Are there other ideas or changes to current ideas that should be considered and analyzed that are not already presented?**

Primary Issues That This Plan Will Address

Natural and Cultural Resource Impacts

- Visitor-created trails and visitor-widening of trails due to increasing visitation, which causes natural and cultural resource damage.
- High visitation results in increased human waste and litter on the ground, which can negatively impact soil, water quality, and aquatic species.
- High volumes of vehicles on roads and visitors on trails, in meadows, and in other areas of the park may impede wildlife migration corridors and disrupt breeding.
- Illegal roadside parking causes damage to park resources, including soil and vegetation.

Diminishing Quality of the Visitor Experience

- High vehicle use levels in many areas of the park lead to traffic delays and greater demand for parking than is available.
- Increasing visitation rates result in more crowded trails, disrupted viewsheds, and higher competition for locations where visitors can participate in activities such as fishing and rock climbing.
- Human waste and litter along trails are increasing with higher visitation, diminishing the visitor experience.
- High visitor-use levels impede visitors' ability to experience the wilderness character in some areas of the park.
- Visitors experience restrooms that are in poor condition because custodians are less able to access them in a timely manner for regular cleaning and maintenance due to traffic congestion.
- Visitors are unable to access interpretive programs or find parking, reducing their access to face-to-face interactions with park rangers for park information and basic orientation.

Visitor and Staff Safety Concerns

- Traffic congestion and illegally parked vehicles extending into the road inhibit traffic flow and create unsafe conditions.
- Parking and traffic congestion leads to visitor frustration, which can result in hostile interactions between visitors and park staff.
- Illegal activities, such as illegal campfires, are increasing with the higher number of visitors at one time.

Heavy Strain on the Park's Facilities and Ability to Perform Daily Operations

- Park staff are unable to provide in-park educational opportunities for visitors, perform natural and cultural resource protection and restoration activities, and perform basic maintenance on roads, restrooms, and other park facilities due to traffic, congestion, and high parking volumes in developed areas.
- High levels of wear and tear on facilities are increasing the park's deferred maintenance.

Strategies to Address Access and Congestion

The issues this planning process aims to address are diverse and complex. No single strategy will address all issues. The following ideas are organized into combinations of concept strategies that together address key issues. We are seeking your feedback on these ideas as a part of this planning process.

Idea 1: Timed Entry Two Reservation System: Bear Lake Road Corridor and "Rest of Park"

Overview:

- This idea would be similar to how the park managed vehicle volumes in 2022.
- Advance reservations would be available for private vehicles.
- Reservations would be made through an online vendor. The park would work with local retailers to offer additional online booking locations.
- The reservation system would be for arrivals, in blocks of two hours. There would be no length of stay requirement, and visitors could leave at any time.
- Reservations would be released in advance (one month ahead in 2022), with a percentage of reservations (this was 30% in 2022) being held for sale the day before.
- The reservation system would apply to all areas of the park, but two reservation options would be available: a reservation for the Bear Lake Road Corridor, including access to all areas of the park, and a reservation for "the rest of the park": all areas of the park except for the Bear Lake Road Corridor.

Key benefits:

Through a series of temporary pilot programs at this park and other public lands, the National Park Service has learned that well-designed reservation systems can increase the quality of visitor experiences, proactively distribute use across time and space, serve as a useful trip-planning tool for visitors, and better protect natural and cultural resources. Using a timed-entry format for reservations allows the greatest number of visitors to access the park without exceeding the area's capacity.

Trade-offs:

Reservation systems have administrative costs in addition to the entrance fee. Online reservations can be challenging for people with limited computer knowledge or limited access to the internet. For visitors without knowledge of the park, understanding the different types of reservations can add complexity and confusion.

Other considerations:

- **Commercial use.** A strategy or system may be needed to proactively and specifically manage commercial use during managed access periods.
- **Types of reservations.** Two types of reservations (or a combination of both) could be considered for this concept:

    1. **Ticketed.** These reservations are available online on a first-come, first-served basis.
    2. **Lottery.** These reservations allow anyone to enter a lottery drawing and typically are used for high-demand areas.

Adaptive management:

The park could make minor adjustments during the season as needed, based on data available, weather, and staffing. Additional reservation areas could be added (such as Wild Basin Corridor or Alpine Visitor Center parking) to maintain desired conditions if visitor use patterns change.

Idea 2: Set Number of Timed Entry Reservations for Each Entrance Station, with Shuttle-Only Access to Bear Lake, Glacier Basin, and Bierstadt

Overview:

- This idea would provide a set number of reservations for each entrance station to manage for desired conditions in specific areas of the park.
- Bear Lake, Glacier Gorge, and Bierstadt trailheads would only be accessible by shuttle from Park and Ride during set hours of the day. Private and commercial vehicles could access the area outside of the set hours and seasons.
- Entrance station-specific reservations would be made through an online vendor, and the park would work with local retailers to offer additional booking locations.
- Reservations would be released in advance with a percent of reservations being held for sale the day before.
- There would not be a length-of-stay requirement, and visitors could leave at any time. Once inside the park, visitors could move around freely with a shuttle to access the Bear Lake Road Corridor. The shuttle to Bear Lake, Glacier Gorge, and Bierstadt would be first-come, first-served, and information about wait times would be provided.

Key benefits:

Through a series of temporary pilot programs at this park and other public lands, the National Park Service has learned that well-designed reservation systems can increase the quality of visitor experiences, proactively distribute use across time and space, serve as a useful trip-planning tool for visitors, and better protect natural and cultural resources. With visitors dispersed to different entrance stations, the overall number of reservations available in a day could increase.

Trade-offs:

Reservation systems have administrative costs in addition to the entrance fee. Online reservations can be challenging for visitors with limited computer knowledge or limited access to the internet. For visitors without knowledge of the park, learning the location of different entrance stations in relation to other travel plans can add complexity and confusion. Area-specific actions may be required as visitor use shifts.

Other considerations:

- **Commercial use.** A strategy or system may be needed to proactively and specifically manage commercial use during managed access periods.
- **Types of reservations.** Two types of reservations (or a combination of both) could be considered for this concept.
    1. **Ticketed.** These reservations are available online on first-come, first-served basis.
    2. **Lottery.** These reservations allow anyone to enter a lottery drawing and are typically used for high-demand areas.

Adaptive management:

Additional reservation areas could be added (such as for Wild Basin Corridor or Alpine Visitor Center parking) to maintain desired conditions if visitor use patterns change. Times and seasons could also be extended if thresholds are exceeded.

Idea 3: Daily Reservations

Overview:

- This idea would provide a set number of reservations for each day that would allow admittance at any time during that day.
- Reservations would be made through an online vendor, and the park would work with local retailers to offer additional booking locations.
- Reservations would be released in advance, with a percent of reservations being held for sale the day before.
- There would not be a length-of-stay requirement, and visitors could leave at any time. Once inside, park visitors could move around freely, with no restrictions in any corridors.

Key benefits:

This concept would offer only one type of pass, with the greatest freedom for arrival time during the day and movement within the park. This type of reservation would be easy to navigate for visitors who have limited knowledge of the park.

Trade-offs:

Reservation systems have administrative costs in addition to the entrance fee. Online reservations can be challenging for visitors with limited computer knowledge or limited access to the internet. The number of daily reservations would likely decrease from timed entry to manage for desired conditions during peak times of the day.

Other considerations:

- **Commercial use.** A strategy or system may be needed to proactively and specifically manage commercial use during managed-access periods.
- **Types of reservations.** Two types of reservations (or a combination of both) could be considered for this concept.
    1. **Ticketed.** These reservations are available online on a first-come, first-served basis.
    2. **Lottery.** These reservations allow anyone to enter a drawing (usually monthly) and are typically used for high-demand areas.

Idea 4: Metering and Temporary Delays at Entrances

Overview:

- This idea is a reactive management strategy.
- Once parking lots fill up, staff would delay vehicles from entering the park until space opens to accommodate more people and vehicles.
- Temporary delays of three to five hours could be expected.
- Gate metering and closures at main entrances have not been piloted at Rocky Mountain National Park but have been piloted at other national park system units and public lands.

Key benefits:

This idea would require no online reservations or additional fees and could be quickly implemented on an as-needed basis. Visitors would have freedom of movement once inside the park.

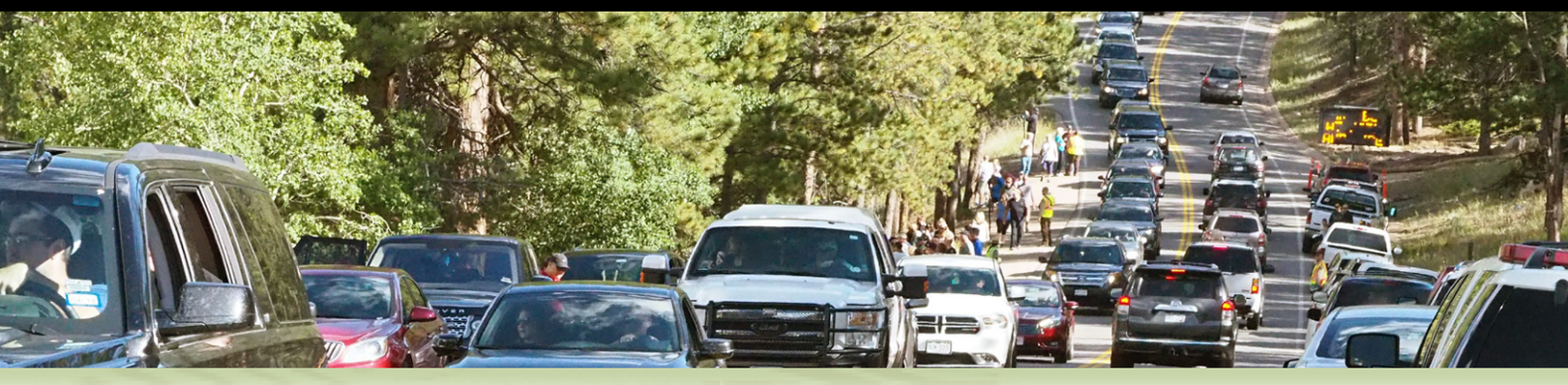
Trade-offs:

Access through entrance stations could be closed for several hours, and closures may or may not be predictable. Visitors could be in long lines for several hours and would need to plan ahead for gas, food, water, and bathroom needs. Traffic could be backed up into town and could block other public and private accesses. Once inside the park, visitors would likely not be able to access desired destinations if parking lots are already full.

Other considerations:

Administrative and commercial use would need to be accounted for.

- **Times/seasons:** Metering could be implemented any time of year if thresholds are reached.
- **Adaptive management:** Additional areas could be added to maintain desired conditions if visitor use patterns change or if “hot spots” emerge due to social media or natural events.



Other Strategies to Consider

Some strategies are likely to be employed under any future management scenario. These strategies are considered practical, common-sense approaches to park management and are grounded in National Park Service policy and best practices. These are strategies that will help ensure that goals and desired conditions are met.

Enhance Education and Trip-Planning Tips

Travel tools, such as message boards, social media posts, and other trip-planning and travel information, help improve visitor experiences by giving visitors the information to make informed choices about their visit. Pilot programs have shown that while enhanced trip planning and travel forecasting can be helpful, they are not effective as a stand-alone strategy but enhance any concept above.

Potential strategies:

- Improve visitor orientation and information outside the park, such as live webcams.
- Enhance digital or in-person tools (dashboards, story maps, geofencing with text alerts and additional evolving technology) for advanced trip planning. Enhance partnership opportunities to provide videos and trip-planning tips for area guests and park visitors.
- Provide a dashboard on the park's website with information on the busiest times of year with travel tips, including an informational video.
- Increase parking delineators and signage to reduce unendorsed parking.

Your ideas?

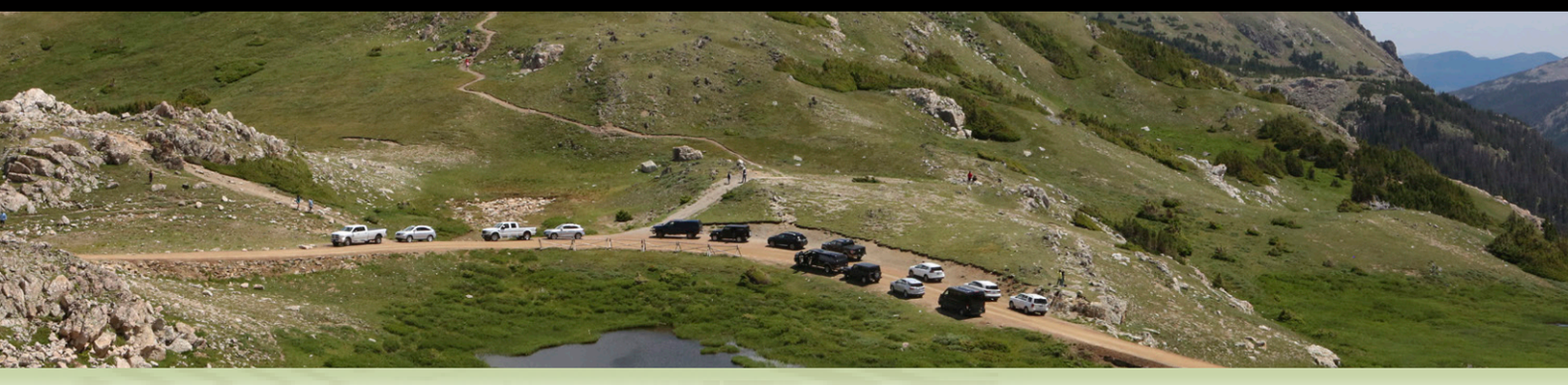
Shuttles

The park will continue shuttle operations to provide a range of modes that visitors may use to access the park.

Potential strategies:

- Frequency, timing, and seasonality of shuttle services would be adaptively managed based on funding, observed conditions, and effectiveness of strategies to meet desired conditions.
- The park may continue operations of current shuttle routes, including the Hiker Shuttle, the Bear Lake Road Corridor shuttle, and the Moraine Park shuttle.
- The park may consider additional shuttle stops at Deer Ridge Junction and Alluvial Fan.
- The park may consider developing additional parking outside of designated wilderness, such as at the Deer Ridge Junction, which may include a shuttle stop.
- During certain times of the day, the park could implement shuttle-only access specific to trailheads or other popular destinations. During peak seasons or peak times of day, private vehicles would park at the Park and Ride and use the shuttle to access areas beyond the intersection. Outside of the set hours, vehicles could freely access all parking areas of the Bear Lake Road Corridor.

Your ideas?



Area-Specific Ideas

Some locations in the park face specific issues and are unique enough that the planning team came up with specific strategies to manage those locations. These strategies can be considered separately or combined with the reservation and metering concepts.

Longs Peak

Issue/opportunity:

Longs Peak is an iconic experience at Rocky Mountain National Park. Visitors may access hiking trails to reach parts of the mountain, but only technical routes allow visitors to ascend to the summit. These trails and routes provide opportunities for self-reliance and risk-taking, but also poise difficult and dangerous search-and-rescue operations when visitors need help.

Potential strategies:

- Require an educational permit (with no limit on the number of permits) to climb Longs Peak. This would help ensure that visitors are fully informed of potential hazards, have essential trip-planning knowledge, and receive education on wilderness values.
- Require an educational permit (with a limited number of permits) to climb Longs Peak. This would ensure that visitors are fully informed of potential hazards, have essential trip-planning knowledge, and receive education on wilderness values. It also would reduce crowding on the mountain, which could improve visitor experience and safety.
- Offer a lottery to climb Longs Peak to decrease queuing and increase opportunities for solitude.
- Require use of human waste-removal bags to address site-specific water pollution.

Your ideas?

Key Destinations in Tundra Ecosystems

Issue/opportunity:

Areas in tundra ecosystems (such as Milner Pass) are highly sensitive ecological and cultural areas. In some parking areas, visitor-created trails are damaging irreplaceable resources.

Potential strategies:

- Offer guided-only hiking in the most sensitive areas.
- Formalize trails and offer a timed reservation (permit or lottery) for parking.

Wild Basin

Issue/opportunity:

The Wild Basin area offers visitors more primitive park experiences through its slow-speed, winding gravel road access and trail system that offers access to the North St. Vrain River, waterfalls, and alpine lakes. The park wants to preserve this historic visitor experience.

Potential strategies:

- Require a reservation to access Wild Basin.
- Implement a metering system.
- Install small roadside barriers to deter unendorsed parking.
- Formalize trails to key water features with minimum barriers (such as fallen trees) to decrease social trailing and associated resource damage.

Your ideas?