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PROPOSED ALTERNATIVES FOR THE REDUCTION OF AUTOMOBILE
TRAFFIC IMPACTS TO THE SCENIC HIGHWAY,
COLUMBIA RIVER GORGE NATIONAL SCENIC AREA

by

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TERMINAL PROJECT

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Preface

This project was developed in partial fulfillment of the requirements of a Master of Science Degree in Environmental Studies at the University of Oregon. The ideas and opinions presented in this report are my own, and do not reflect those of the agencies or individuals I contacted to complete my research.

This report will be presented to the Transportation Committee of the Columbia Gorge Commission, on June 12, 1989. My hope is that it will stimulate discussion to develop a new transportation strategy for the Scenic Highway, employing alternatives to private automobile traffic.

In addition, I want to encourage the residents of the Columbia Gorge to get involved with the management process, and let their ideas and opinions be known. This project is an exercise in public involvement; the opportunity to do the same is available for all.

Executive Summary

This report outlines a proposal for reducing the negative impacts associated with intensive automobile traffic on the Columbia Gorge Scenic Highway. The Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Act of 1986, includes an allowance for public involvement in the planning process, and this proposal is an exercise of that opportunity. The goals and provisions of the Scenic Act serve to provide a framework for this proposal, and a model for its development. In writing my proposal, I stress the enhancement of natural and scenic resources and encourage the development of small businesses in the local economy. I emphasize compatibility with existing resources, physical limitations and future expectations of the Gorge. These themes are apparent throughout the Scenic Act, and they are included in this proposal as well.

To promote ideas which could reduce the impacts of auto traffic and, in a larger sense, lower the impact of human involvement on the Scenic Highway, I needed a structural context to show how the concepts might be implemented. I first compiled a list of eight objectives, to be used both as a guide and "measuring stick" for assessing the effectiveness of the proposal. The objectives include: 1) reducing environmental impacts to ecologically significant areas; 2) increasing the potential for recreation; 3) reducing automobile and pedestrian traffic hazards; 4) allowing for an increase in tourism; 5) preserving scenic, cultural and historic areas; 6) enhancing economic development; 7) maintaining a rural setting; and 8) providing access for a broader segment of the population. Next, I converted my ideas into the workable components of a project. The project components include methods of traffic restriction, alternative modes of transportation, increased access for those without automobiles and the handicapped, and measures for increasing the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists. Recognizing the flexibility of the components, I combined them into three workable alternatives, offering varied degrees of traffic reduction, and evaluated them

against the overall objectives of the proposal. In addition, I included a "no action" alternative, to illustrate the contrast between the three project alternatives and the present system of traffic management.

The proposal is suggested to be implemented during the months of June, July, August, and September every year. One component proposed to reduce traffic would restrict access for private autos, trucks, and R.V.s; these passengers would be allowed to use a system of shuttle busses to transport them through the area. The shuttle system would actually serve a dual purpose: to transport visitors (arriving in automobiles) through the Gorge, and provide a link to the Tri-Met bus line for people (including those without autos) in the Portland/Vancouver area. Another component proposed to reduce traffic is a Highway toll, implemented in conjunction with a restriction to large-vehicles. The toll, charged to drivers while the shuttles are operating, can be used as an incentive for increasing use of the shuttle. Park 'n ride lots, located at the boundaries of the restricted area, would serve as transfer stations for the shuttles. Bicycle racks would be included on shuttle busses. Safety for bicyclists on the Highway is addressed by introducing the "share lane", a boundary-line that drivers and bicyclists may use while passing. Handicapped persons would benefit through the provision shuttles, and improved wheelchair access to recreation sites in the area. Residents and businesses located along the Highway would retain free access to the road, through the use of a permit system allowing unrestricted passage through the area.

Alternative #1 restricts all visitor traffic to the area for the entire four-month period. Employing the permit system, only those living or working in the restricted section, resident's guests, and business patrons, would be allowed access in their vehicles. The shuttle busses would operate every day, and no Highway toll would be used. Six Park 'n ride lots would be constructed, and security provided. Bicycle traffic would be promoted, and the share lane adopted. Ramps for wheelchairs and handrails are included, to improve access for handicapped persons.

Alternative #2 uses a traffic restriction to large vehicles only. The shuttle system would operate only on weekends, and five park 'n rides would be constructed. A Highway toll would be charged to visitors, and the permit system used on weekends for area residents. The share lane for bicyclists and structural changes for handicapped persons are included.

Alternative #3 does not promote any restriction for vehicles. No Highway toll would be used, and shuttle service is provided as an option. Access for handicapped persons is unchanged from the other alternatives.

Alternative #4 is a choice of "no action".

The impacts of the project alternatives on resources, local residents, and visitors are addressed. Some changes in trip-planning and the behavior of visitors will take place if the proposed components are implemented.

I recommend Alternative #2 be implemented. This alternative would allow travellers to have a choice in their mode of transportation through the area, and could be easily expanded to account for future increases in visitation. Traffic reduction would be accomplished by using the toll as an incentive for using the shuttles, and offers visitors a trip with fewer adverse environmental impacts than an auto trip would produce.

The process of creating project alternatives for reducing the negative impacts of traffic on the Scenic Highway has led me to four basic conclusions: 1) positive impacts to both people and Gorge resources can be accomplished by reducing the amount of motorized traffic on the Scenic Highway; 2) small business development can be accomplished in local communities by utilizing their advantage as entrance points to the area; 3) safety for drivers, pedestrians, and bicyclists can be increased by using a combination of traffic restriction and incentives for using alternatives to the automobile; 4) the outdoor recreation experience people will have in the Gorge can be enhanced by a reduction in impacts associated with the private automobile on the Scenic Highway.