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January 7, 2014

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Superintendent Frank Dean
Golden Gate National Recreation Area
Fort Mason Building 201
San Francisco, CA 94123

Dear Superintendent Dean,

On behalf of the Marin County Board of Supervisors, we wish to offer the following comments regarding your proposal to reduce congestion while improving resource management, safety, and the visitor experience at Muir Woods National Monument. We agree that the goals you have for this natural treasure are worthwhile, and we believe that your pursuit of them should include equal effort to reduce impacts on southern Marin residents and businesses, primarily experienced as excessive congestion on local roads.

We appreciate that you have reached out to the County and included members of our Board as well as managers from our Department of Public Works as you consider what appropriate initiatives should proceed. We also thank you for holding a community meeting in September in southern Marin, extending the public comment period until January 11, 2014, and assuring the public that you will meet with them again shortly after the public comment period closes to report on comments received and to identify your intended next steps. Given the high level of interest and the historic concerns raised by affected neighborhoods that form the gateway to Muir Woods, we encourage you to continue to reach out to the public in your deliberations and decision making process.

Supervisor Steve Kinsey and I represent the communities most impacted by visitors to Muir Woods and we have been working directly with your management team, as well as local residents, to insure that information is fully shared in a timely way. We convened a community meeting on December 9th, which was attended by over 175 persons for the purpose of listening to local ideas and concerns regarding modifications to access and management of Muir Woods. In addition, Supervisor Kinsey met with the Muir Beach community on December 4 to discuss these matters. Furthermore, all five Marin County Supervisors serve as Directors on the Marin County Transit District Board, the agency that currently partners with the National Park Service to operate the seasonal Muir Woods Shuttle. As such, each of us has a strong interest in the changes that are being considered.

We want to thank you for publicly acknowledging that your consideration of a permanent parking lot and park-run shuttle stop located on Panoramic Highway has been eliminated due to the overwhelming concerns expressed by the community. It was both a wise and good faith effort to eliminate that concept from further consideration, because it allows a more positive and focused discussion about what other options remain feasible.

We fully support your interest in developing a visitor reservation system and consider it to be a promising tool to help reduce deterioration of Muir Woods' environmental quality while also improving your visitors' experience. We ask that you incorporate a cap on daily, weekly, and annual visitation into your reservation program that does not, overall, increase annual visitation numbers. By doing so, the Woods will be healthier, gateway neighbors will experience reduced traffic impacts, and those who make a reservation will be better able to take in the majestic quality of the grove.

Many in our community believe that an independent science-based analysis of the carrying capacity of Muir Woods should be undertaken to insure that whatever levels of visitation are set will be sustainable over time. We encourage you to consider this suggestion and be prepared to have a full discussion of this idea the next time you meet with the community.

We encourage you to focus your access strategy on expanded transit services, utilizing an expansion of the Muir Woods Shuttle in lieu of starting an independent Park Service shuttle program. We believe the appropriate locations for collecting visitors should be closer to their trip origin, including established bus stops in San Francisco, ferry landings, and the current Muir Woods Shuttle staging area. We also support reduction of parking at Muir Woods and charging for parking there, with some of the revenues being made available to offset the increased transit service operational and capital costs. We believe it would be counterproductive to establish new transit facilities requiring visitors to travel through the Tam Junction to get to the staging area. We have also heard that many of the private tour buses currently bringing visitors to the Woods are too large to safely traverse the winding roads leading to it. We stand ready to help you in any legal means available to limit and control larger buses coming to Muir Woods.

The public has expressed a deep and pervasive concern about the ongoing parking of cars along the shoulder of Franks Valley Road. We want to continue our discussion with your agency about collaborating to address these concerns through reduction or elimination of the unpermitted parking that currently occurs. In our public discussions, the public has not supported the suggestion of an alternative proposal to create a traffic light-controlled section of Franks Valley Road to allow for vehicle parking on the established paved area instead of continuing to park on the unpaved shoulders.

During the course of our community discussions, we have also heard concern expressed about the level of emergency and disaster planning coordination between the Park Service and the public safety agencies serving southern Marin County. We encourage you to amplify the existing plans that are in place and to continue working closely with all public safety entities to insure that visitor support will exist during an emergency without undermining the needs of local residents and businesses.

We close by expressing our appreciation for your interest in modifying the existing pattern and level of visitation to Muir Woods. We share the recognition that the long-term interests of this unique natural resource require a reduction in the number of visitors and a shift away from dependence upon auto access to a significantly greater utilization of bus transit. We look forward to working as your partner to achieve such a goal, including our residents and businesses in the process as we move forward.

Sincerely,

Kate Sears
President, Marin County Board of Supervisors