

**Access Fund | Glacier Peak Institute | Granite Falls Historical Museum | The Mountaineers | Washington Climbers Coalition | Washington Trails Association**

January 23rd, 2024

To:

Snohomish County Executive Dave Somers

CC:

Executive Director Lacy Harper

Director of Conservation and Natural Resources Tom Teigen

Parks and Recreation Division Director Sharon Swan

In late 2019, Washington Trails Association convened a cadre of stakeholders including the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Service, the Washington State Department of Natural Resources and several others, including nonprofits and community leaders, to discuss the future of the Mountain Loop Highway. The cadre came together to produce a vision for the trail system on the Mountain Loop and to identify priority needs and opportunities for the next 10 years. The effort to understand the needs of current and future visitors included a visitor survey led by the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station, a visitor preferences modeling study done by the University of Washington's Outdoor Recreation and Data Lab, close coordination with the Forest Service, community input from the 10+ member cadre and input from tribes.

A major milestone of this work was completed in October 2023 with the finalization of the south Mountain Loop Highway Trails Vision after five years of work. Now, the cadre serves as a lasting group of passionate regional partners with a role to play in implementation of report recommendations and general stewardship of the Mountain Loop Highway. One of the report's priority recommendations includes the establishment of a regional recreation council.

Washington's public lands are beloved by the more than four million people who live here. Getting outside is critical to people's mental and physical health, and enjoying the outdoors is a key activity to people living in this region. Through factors like the pandemic, the outdoor industry's efforts to decrease historic barriers to outdoor access and population growth, the number of people who are benefitting from access to Washington's outdoors is growing.

Emerging questions, research and responses ask us to consider the impact of visitation to natural resources, wildlife, and cultural resources, specifically in more popular areas. The Mountain Loop Highway is situated less than two hours from millions of people. There is a need to better equip land management agencies with the tools they need to tackle growing management challenges. For the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie Forest Service alone, deferred maintenance on the Mountain Loop Highway exceeds \$42 million. This region has a multitude of private, state, and federal landowners with no single entity responsible for cross-boundary issues. Thus, decisions that are enormously consequential to the region are made in silos by various land managers, without sufficient input from other regional stakeholders. The creation of a cross-functional and cross-jurisdictional Eastern Snohomish Sustainable Recreation Council (ESSRC) is needed to better manage recreation in Snohomish County and the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. The ESSRC presents an opportunity to engage on a regional scale alongside the USFS to develop tactical projects and action plans with local, state, and NGO land managers in the region.

The signatories on this letter request that Snohomish County elected officials support the establishment of an Eastern Snohomish Sustainable Recreation Council, made up of local governments, through an Interlocal Agreement under RCW Chapter 39.34. The County needs to be a leader, alongside the

Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest and among local municipalities, in creating a council of governments to support resource preservation, collaborative funding, implementation, and sustainable recreation.

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