Rapid Appraisal Report on the Recreation Use & Management Situation In the Albion Basin

Prepared for
Town of Alta
Mayor and Council

Prepared by
Dr. Glenn E. Haas, Prof. Emeritus
Colorado State University
3403 Green Wing Court
Fort Collins, Colorado 80524
glennehaas@comcast.net

August 7, 2018

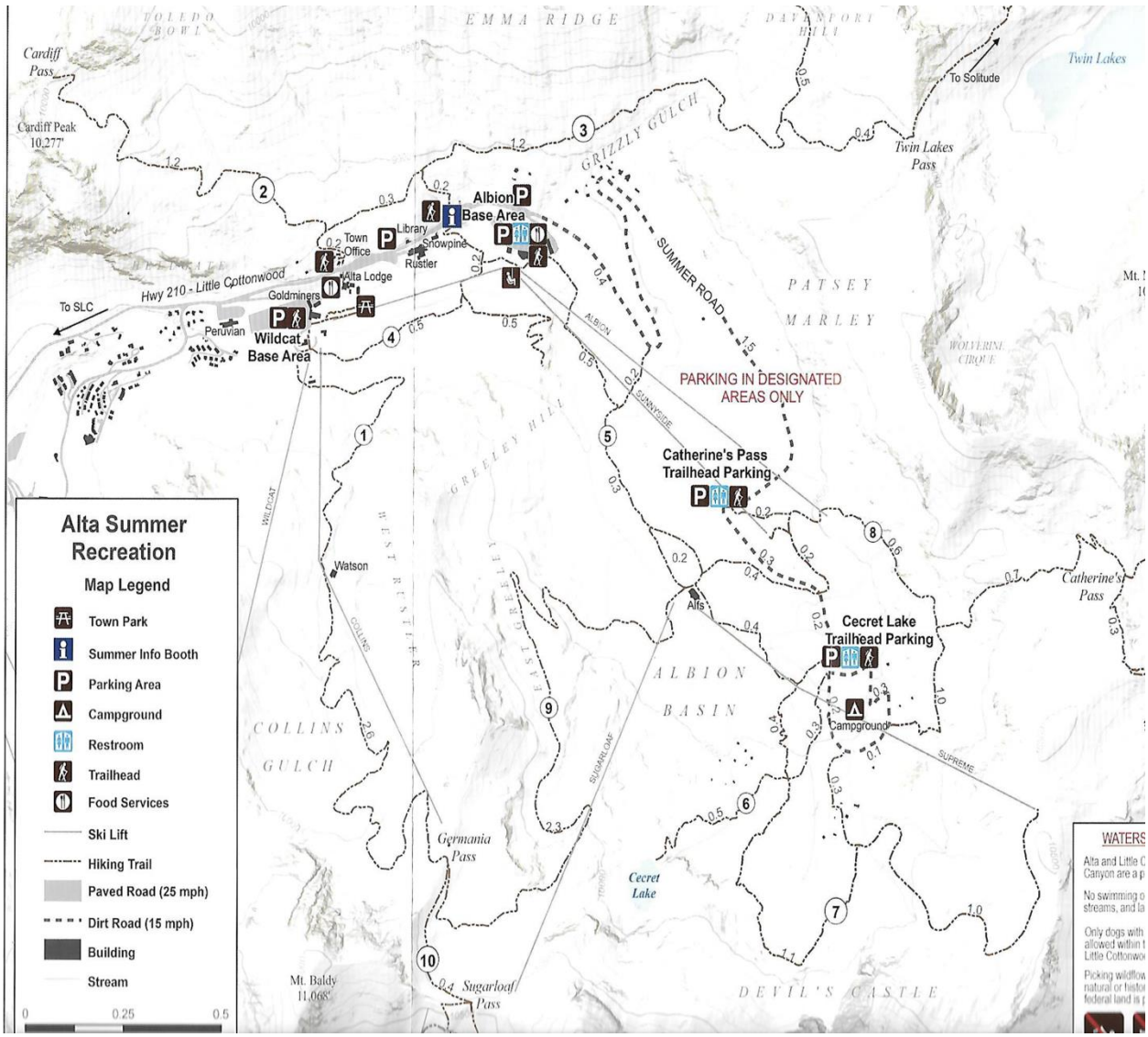
Preamble

Preparation of a rapid appraisal report comes with trepidation on my part. The Albion Basin has had many studies, plans, partners and a long rich history. I do not portend to have a complete understanding nor expect to offer any observation or recommendation that has not been mentioned by others in the past.

But, I do hope a fresh set of "eyes" from an external objective professional may offer a new perspective and perhaps even a couple of good ideas. At the least, I hope this report will be a catalyst for discussion from which progress and improvement springs to protect the very special Albion Basin.

Thank you to the many people who assisted on my site visit of July 25-28, 2018.

- Tom Pollard (former Alta Mayor) and Kate Pollard
- Jen Clancy, Friends of Alta
- Sara Gibbs, Alta Community Enrichment
- Van Edgette, ASL summer ski lift operator
- Joanne Cameron, ASL Albion Grill
- Sheridan Davis, Alta Town Councilwoman
- Del Draper, cabin owner in Albion Basin
- Roger Bourke, Alta Planning Commission
- Margaret Bourke, Alta Town Councilwoman
- Greg Bell, Mountain Operations, ASL
- Maura Olivos, ASL's Alta Environmental Center
- Chris Cawley, Town of Alta Assistant Town Administrator
- Marshall Alford, USFS Recreation Staff, Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest
- Cliff Curry, Alta Town Councilman
- Carl Fisher, Save our Canyons
- Kathy Scully, ASL information booth
- Terry Ryder, ASL information booth
- Kevin Payne, Deputy Alta Marshall
- James Chickvary, Deputy Alta Marshal
- Barbara Jordan, Alta resident
- Alicia and Peter Pond, Alta residents
- Matt Rawlins, Alta resident
- ASL mountain ski lift hosts
- George Gavin, Land and Leisure campground host
- Mike Gunn, SLCity Watershed Ranger
- Cody Ross, USFS Ranger, Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest



Project Purpose

The purpose of this project was to conduct a rapid appraisal of the recreation management and visitor capacity situation in the Albion Basin Road Area. In addition to reviewing a host of documents and websites, Haas interviewed local people and observed the situation first-hand from July 25-29, 2018. This report presents his professional observations and recommendations.

Haas Observations

O1. Is there a visitor use/capacity problem in Albion Basin? **Yes, based upon the following factors among others:**

a. There is no NEPA-compliant comprehensive recreation use management plan for the Basin (The Forest Plan is too general and not sufficient).
b. There are no clear, detailed, and community- embraced management objectives describing the desired recreation opportunity the area is being managed to provide. (Simply referring to activities like hiking is not sufficient; reference to providing the "Alta experience" is also too vague and not sufficient).
c. The key attraction and most popular destination in the Basin is Cecret Lake; it is devoid of a visitor capacity; receives no regular management presence; it is very heavily visited and the new proposed secondary parking lot would add to congestion and visitation.
d. Increasing visitor use in the Basin has displaced some local and long-time visitors.
e. There is no consistent or long-term monitoring of key natural resources or recreation use.
f. Visitors are waiting in the parking lots for a spot, or creating a spot where none exists.
g. There is insufficient management presence by hosts or law enforcement (i.e., vehicles traveling above 15mph limit, illegally parking along road, visitors walking off-trail, visitors picking wildflowers),
h. Trail signage is confusing in some locations, devoid at many junctions, generally inconsistent and too general or often in poor condition.
i. Unauthorized (i.e., social, renegade) trails are numerous causing resource degradation, visitor confusion, and loss of natural beauty.
j. The volume of trail use, congestion, and unauthorized activities (e.g., swimming, fishing, drones), particularly on the iconic Cecret Lake trail, is problematic.
k. Unmanaged and substantial commercial use of the Basin by professional photographers taking wedding, family, and other pictures is conflicting with recreation use and causing resource degradation.

O2. Are there signs of an improving recreation management situation in the Basin? **Yes, based upon the following among other factors.**

a. The cooperative Summer Recreation Pilot Program involving the ASL, USFS and Town of Alta is very promising, although some people expressed a desire for better cooperation and communication among the three participants.
b. The fee-based limited vehicular entry-system managed by the Alta Ski Area is a positive improvement to unbridled visitation. It is impressive and kudos are deserving. It is rare and gratifying to see the private sector take on such a large program that has such benefits to the community, local visitors and natural integrity of the Basin.
c. The information booth is a valued asset. The staff provides information to visitors about how to visit the Basin including the fee-based limited vehicle option, the fee-based ski lift option of weekends, and the no-fee trail access option from the base neat Albion Grill. Providing people with information about the vehicle option before they get in line at the fee booth helps to make the program run smoother. They can also answer question about alternative trails so that visitors have options.
d. The information booth staff reported that the public is very supportive of the program.
e. While ASL initially underestimated the time, effort, and costs of the program (e.g., too few staff and insufficient parking lot monitoring), they recognize that this is a "pilot year", that problems and challenges are to be expected, and there seems to be a commitment to change and improve the system going forward. Kudos need to be offered to the employees involved in this pilot project for their "above and beyond the call of duty" tireless efforts under some trying first year conditions.
f. $6 per vehicle seems low and may not cover all the operational costs (i.e., salary, supplies, maps, cleaning supplies, parking lot patrol), particularly for the added staff.
g. It appears there is a need for 4 additional staff people for the vehicle entry-system----2 mountain hosts to rotate during the week to provide information and monitoring occupancy at the parking lots and 2 additional people to help at the information booth on busy weekend days to reduce the long lines and waits.
h. The weekend operation of the Sunnyside chair lift adds an attractive option to access the Basin. It is enjoyable and provides an exciting new perspective. ASL has employed two mountain hosts at the bottom and two mountain hosts at the top of the lift who provide much needed visitor information and management presence that will help to mitigate some of the factors highlighted in Observation #O1. Kudos.
i. ASL understands they have a responsibility to help manage and protect the Albion Basin as part of their special use permit, coupled with their business desire for expanded summer operations, revenue to cover costs, and stewardship of the Basin.
j. There is respect and appreciation for ASL, but there is also some skepticism about whether this program reflects "corporate benevolent stewardship" or otherwise.

O3. Is the utilization of visitor capacity sufficient in the Basin? No.

a. A visitor capacity is a fundamental professional recreation management tool but yet its utility seems to be disregarded and even met with objection.
b. In Alta and the Basin one can find numerous examples of a visitor capacity for such locations as a campground, parking lot, ski lift, restaurants, bathrooms, hot tubs and swimming pools, among others. The Forest Service as an agency sets capacities on the allowable board feet of timber to harvest, number and duration of cattle grazing, number and user-days for commercial outfitter and guides, and often for wilderness, backcountry, and river systems. The state wildlife agency sets capacities of the number of days to hunt and number of species a sportsperson may harvest.
c. Yet, a visitor capacity is not being used to help manage the most popular and iconic destination in all of Little Cottonwood Canyon---that being Cecret Lake. Not using this tool is a mistake in large part due to lack of understanding and/or misinformation. Thus, a visitor capacity primer is offered in the Recommendations Section of this report.

O4. What will happen in the event that recreation use is not proactively and professionally managed in the Albion Basin?

Incremental and haphazard creep towards urban development.

Professional recreation planners and managers have a tool to map and analyze future recreation use alternatives called the Water and Land Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (WALROS). While far beyond explanation in this Report, one purpose of the tool is to help visualize what the current recreation opportunities an area is being managed to provide. Below is a depiction of the spectrum and the general placement of the Alta Ski Area relative to other ski areas.

Park City	Solitude	Brighton	Alta		
Aspen/Vail	Snowbird				
Urban	Suburban	Rural Developed	Rural Natural	Semi-Primitive	Primitive

WALROS Spectrum

a. In the event that recreation use is not well managed, there is a tendency for incremental development creep. The natural tendency over time, in the absence of clear and detailed management direction, is more and bigger human-built environs overtaking the natural environs and resources.
b. ASL holds a special and discriminating niche among ski areas whereby the natural environment still predominates the setting.
c. Alta has not "dropped-anchor" yet on what type of recreation use and resource conditions are desired for the area. This decision has not been clearly articulated in a NEPA-compliant approved recreation use management plan. Without the "anchor" provided by such a plan, changes will be haphazard, unintended, incremental, driven by singular interests, and lacking full and transparent analyses.
d. Furthermore, in the absence of such a plan, the Albion Basin will creep to the urban-end of the Water Land Recreation Opportunity Spectrum and forego the rural- natural niche it enjoys at this time. This change may well be desired and good, but the change should not be haphazard, unintended, incremental, driven by singular interests, or lacking full and transparent analyses.

O5. Where is the most conflicted area in the Basin? The general vicinity around and between the Cecret Lake trailhead parking lot and Cecret Lake.

a. The Cecret Lake Trailhead Parking lot conflicts with the adjacent developed campground in terms of traffic, dust, engine noise, hikers passing through the campground, hikers using toilet and water tap in the campground, and camping parties with extra vehicles parking in the trailhead lot.
b. The campground host indicated that campers would ask to move their site to the other side of campground loop to get away from hikers passing through the campground.
c. Hikers to Cecret Lake walk .3 miles on a wide dusty unpaved road used by basin cabin residents, their service contractors, and ASL maintenance vehicles.
d. The pit toilet near the trailhead is not apparent from the parking lot or from the trail, has poor signage, is not connected to a septic system, and lacks capacity given the amount of use it receives. Waiting lines to use the toilet are common. .
e. There are a number of unauthorized trails (i.e., social trails) near the parking area leading to confusion and further off-trail use.
f. ASL has started construction on another parking lot under the Supreme chair lift near the pit toilet. There is some question about the authorization and approval of this new development. It appears another 30-40 vehicles could use this new lot. An additional 30 vehicles with 2.5 people would put another 75 persons at one time at Cecret Lake, further exacerbating a conflicted situation. This seems to be an example of incremental development creep lacking full and transparent analyses discussed in O4.
g. The Cecret Lake trail is a spur trail rather than a loop trail, and thus there is two-way traffic which forces social interaction at the loss of a rural-natural experience. Hikers also need to step off the trail to let others pass thus causing wider resource degradation and in places a visitor safety hazard. It is ironic that the most popular destination in Albion Basin is also the setting with the least chance to enjoy the sights, sounds, peace and tranquility of nature.
h. Unauthorized fishing and swimming/wading at Cecret Lake is common.
i. The trail on the backside (uphill slope) of Cecret Lake, under the Castle formation, is not developed and may be an unauthorized social trail. There are no signs to indicate open or closed. In any case, this section of trail is not up to USFS trail standards and in places (e.g., boulder field) poses a visitor safety hazard.
j. The volume of use at Cecret Lake is not well documented but, anecdotally, there are stories of 100-200 people at one time at this small 1-2 acre lake. This exceeds any semblance of a nature-based experience and is more akin to a “city park” experience one might have in downtown Salt Lake City.

O6. Other Miscellaneous Observations (in no particular order)

a. Dusty roads discourage mountain bike use.
b. Lack of consistent signage.
c. No loop trail in the lower Basin for those who prefer a shorter hike.
d. Unauthorized social trails are rampant.
e. Placement of logs to deter parallel roadway parking seems to be working**.**
f. Music from Wildflower festival was heard to lift tower #6 up the mountain. Not sure how far one can hear the Saturday music from Albion Grill.
g. There is interest in designating parts of the Basin as a special botanical area.
h. Vandalism is minimal; some on post supporting interpretation signs on Cecret Trail.
i. Young men were seen with remote control big-wheel toy trucks traversing the rocks on the upper Cecret Trail.
j. There seems to be a high percentage of visitors starting from the Albion Grill who appear to be novices as evidenced by flip-flops, no packs, no water, and street clothes.
k. The number of young families and children visiting the area, particularly from the base, is significant and provides Alta the opportunity to serve as a "formative incubator" for young people's healthy outdoor lifestyle and environmental ethic.
l. Inadequate educational opportunities, programs, signs, videos and efforts to introduce the novice enthusiasts to the great outdoors.
m. It would be relatively easy to improve the trail system and to give people more choices by adding loop trails and connectors.
n. The Summer Recreation Trails Plan Proposal (Oct. 24, 2017) is a good working document that needs to be vetted more with the community and interest groups; this proposal could be a major component of a comprehensive recreation use management plan.
o. There is no apparent monitoring of the location or extent of neither unauthorized social trails nor any concerted effort to restore any trails; there are few or no restoration closure signs.
p. Commercial photographers "invade" the Basin in the evening during the peak wildflower season; there seems to be a high level of ignorance, disregard and disrespect for the meadows and wildflowers.
q. There is a high level of local and repeat visitors to the Basin which could be an advantage for recruiting volunteers/staff as Cecret Lake hosts, interpretive guides, citizen scientists to help monitor recreation use and resource conditions, and working on restoration teams among other roles.
r. There was no apparent effort or program to solicit or receive donations from willing visitors for worthy Basin projects.
s. The campground entrance booth and bulletin board area appears trashy, worn, unprofessional, and not inviting to attract people to read the materials.
t. Some visitors do not comply with signage and walk through the maintenance yard east of the Albion Grill.
u. Some local residents do not feel they should be subject to the $6 vehicle fee.
v. The number of environmental partners concerned about the Basin is a real blessing and opportunity. ASL would do well to work collaboratively.

HAAS Recommendations

R1. Develop a comprehensive recreation use management plan.

a. Long-term sustainability of the Albion Basin will take a "village" of collaborative partners and not simply the USFS or ASL. All the partners need to understand and reasonably agree on the desired future for the area and how to get there. Stated otherwise, the village needs to drop-anchor as observed in O4.
b. While some might cringe at the thought of another plan or analysis, the fact remains that a comprehensive recreation use management plan does not exist and is needed. Using the Summer Recreation Trails Plan Proposal as a jump-start makes sense and to utilize a NEPA-compliant planning process is vital.
c. It is important that the Town of Alta and several engaged local residents be part of the planning team as well as its implementation, evaluation, and revision.
d. A comprehensive plan is inclusive of all the important issues, concerns and opportunities for the Basin. It would also address the key resources as well as recreation and other human uses (e.g., commercial photography, private inholdings).
e. The plan should detail the recreation opportunity (ies) the area will be managed to provide (see R2) and set standards and capacities (see R3) to help ensure the resource and recreation quality. Remember you cannot be all things to all people!
f. The plan should also detail the management program to include, but not be limited to, staffing, hosts, monitoring, fees, priority projects, law enforcement, cost-sharing, training, signage, interpretive program, trail development, trail and area closures, role of partners, etc.
g. The plan should be living working document which does not simply sit on a shelf; the plan would guide annual work plans and budgets. It is not to be an encyclopedia of all that is known, but an action document, perhaps 30 pages, of matrices, bullets, priorities, schedule, budget need, and responsible persons.
h. The plan should have a short horizon of say 5-years and be annually updated in the spirit of adaptive management. Public input should be included in the annual update process.

R2. Define the desired recreation opportunity for the Basin.

a. Several decades ago the outdoor recreation profession used what was called the "activity approach" to manage recreation; that is, recreation professionals would simply plan and manage for activities like hiking, fishing and skiing. The fallacy of this approach was that hiking in Salt Lake City, versus Alta, or versus in wilderness was inherently different. Research and common sense shifted our thinking to the "behavioral approach." Today, it is not sufficient to say we are managing for hiking, fishing and skiing without more context and detail about the desired setting and experience to be provided.
b. A recreation opportunity defined as an opportunity for a person to participate in a particular activity in a specific setting in order to enjoy a desired recreation experience and the subsequent benefits this affords. (www.usbr.gov/recreation/publications.html).

c. An Example of a Recreation Opportunity for the Albion Basin

Provide high quality rural-natural recreation opportunities, predominantly for short-term day-use hiking, to experience the sights, sounds, and beauty of Alta's great outdoors with interludes of natural quiet, solitude, and tranquility; in a well-managed setting which provides a sense of safety, predictability and low risk; serving a multi-generational market of visitors from young families, youth, educational groups to seniors and marathon enthusiasts; where human-made noise (e.g., construction, traffic, drones, music, generators and other recreation technology) is uncommon; where moments of peace and tranquility are deeply valued in sharp contrast to the noise, congestion, technology, comforts, conveniences, stress, and development typical of urban environs. The recreation opportunity setting is further described as:

Social Setting--- other day-use hikers will likely be encountered, and occasionally mountain bikers, but they do not overwhelm the sights and sounds of nature and visitor satisfaction; user conflicts and complaints are rare, although crowding and congestion does often occur on the Cecret Trail and lake area around mid-day on weekends and holidays; the trail system in the Basin does afford choices to explore, meander, experience more or less solitude, and to experience several levels of physical challenge; environmental learning and appreciation via signage and hosts is an important component of the recreation opportunity, particularly for young families and children experiencing the great outdoors.

Physical Setting---natural resources dominate the setting although there are some noticeable human-built features such as unpaved road, ski lifts, private cabins, signage, and hiking trails; the water, wildlife, soils, air, and vegetation are in good condition with minimal recreational site impacts (e.g., soil erosion, dust due to speeding, wildlife impacts due to illegal walking into meadows). Maintaining healthy meadows, wetlands, wildflowers, and wildlife (e.g., birds, marmots, pika, moose, deer) are important to the recreation experience.

Managerial Setting---the Albion Basin will have an effective collaborative management program involving the ASL, USFS, the town of Alta, and a number of partnering organizations and engaged citizens; access is managed by a limited fee-based vehicular road access, free human-powered access on trails, and a fee-based ski lift access on weekend/holiday; management is reliant on a robust well-trained host program which staff key locations in the Basin supplemented by daily law enforcement patrol; emergency medicals and citations are infrequent; visitor compliance is sought by the personal appeal of trained hosts who educate and encourage personal responsibility and stewardship(e.g., "Authority of the Resource" technique); monitoring of select resources and recreation use is an important management activity and serves as an input to adaptive management.

R3. Capacity Primer---visitor capacity can help plan and manage Albion Basin.

a. The historic name of "recreational carrying capacity" has been replaced because it was vague and confused professionals and the public. Today, the term is visitor capacity.
b. A visitor capacity is defined as the supply of recreation opportunities that can be accommodated in order to achieve the many management objectives in a comprehensive management plan. By way of analogy, if one conceives of a management plan as a 100-piece jig saw puzzle, visitor capacity is one piece of the puzzle which needs to fit in order to achieve the puzzle's picture. For those people who have trouble with the "c" word, they can substitute "supply of opportunities" for visitor capacity.
c. A visitor capacity is a metric which can vary depending upon the nature of the setting: people at one time, parking lot spots; campsites in a developed campground, gallons in a pit toilet, ski lift capacity, number of animals a hunter can harvest, size of interpretive groups, intervals between commercial outfitter and guides (O&G) launches, dispersed designated campsites, O&G user days, closed areas, allowable number of fish to keep, and on and on.
d. A capacity is not a limit, gate, or red light, but rather is a trigger, a cautionary yellow light, or a warning signal to take another hard look at a situation. A capacity does not force a manager into any specific action but rather sends a signal than adaptive changes may be desirable or necessary.
e. Science and monitoring informs but does not determine a capacity decision; a capacity decision is a prescription made by the responsible official and not a determination.
f. A capacity decision is not made in isolation but rather is one of many decisions made as part of an integrated comprehensive management plan; the decision is ultimately based upon sound professional judgement by the responsible official by using a NEPA-compliant planning process.
g. When a visitor capacity is exceeded, a manager may opt to decrease demand or increase supply of opportunities. The ASL vehicle fee-based system in Albion Basin is an example of reducing demand while ASL is increasing supply by initiating the weekend ski lift operation. Other examples of increasing the supply or capacity include informing people of their trail options (more and better information), encouraging visitors to distribute themselves, adding trail connections and loops, better signage, and ensuring that overflow vehicles from the developed campground are not parked in the parking lots.
h. A one-time event where recreation use (demand) exceeds capacity (supply) does not activate change normally; a capacity is often accompanied by an "occurrence metric"; for example the capacity at Cecret Lake may be expressed as "no more than 50 people at one time occurring on 15% of the summer weekdays."
i. Closely related to visitor capacity are quality standards; both are tools frequently used in recreation use management. Examples of standards may include 80% of visitors report a high or very high sense of satisfaction, citations should not exceed one per week, written complaints should not exceed one per week, trail width will not exceed 48", no more than 10% of visitors (i.e., vehicles) will opt to not pay for fee, Basin hosts will make 30 visitor contacts per day, law enforcement will make a minimum of 4 passes up the Albion Road per day, recreation use at Cecret Lake will be counted/measured at some time between 12-3 on at least three weekdays and one weekend day each week of the season.

R4. Continue the limited fee-based vehicular & ski lift program.

a. Be patient---it will take another 2 years to debug the pilot program and to become fully effective, efficient and understood by public.
b. Program needs a better means to track number of available parking spaces in real-time at the parking lots-----recommend a camera system with monitor at the fee station people can see.
c. Suggest one mountain host roving between two parking lots and 2 more hosts to help at the information booth on busy days
d. $6 vehicle fee is too low plus handling the $1 bills is an administrative burden; I recommend $10 per vehicle similar to Aspen Ski Area (Maroon Bells) in Colorado.
e. Base the fee on three factors---actual, full and reasonable program costs, modest 5% profit to incentivize ASL, and an amount to support needed resource protection and enhancement projects (e.g., restoration, signage, enforcement, host, and trail improvements). Fee collection staff should be aware of the restoration projects and directed to inform visitors.
f. Provide a small "Thank You" card or flyer to each vehicle explaining value of program, how they find more information on the website, how the revenue is used, and where people can make a donation to support special projects in the Basin.
g. In the spirit of transparency and trust, ASL should provide a detailed and public financial accounting of the program at the end of the each season during the pilot years.
h. Consider development of an Albion Basin APP and camera that people could go to and learn about their choices to visit the area and see real-time conditions such as vehicle lines.

R5. Relocate Cecret Lake parking lot and trailhead to Alf's.

a. The most conflicted area in the Basin is the vicinity around the Cecret Lake trailhead parking lot. Reread Haas observation O5----most of these problems would be solved.
b. Cecret Lake visitor capacity could be aided by moving the trailhead some distance further back and in a location where visitors would have three trail options.
c. Very importantly, the current Supreme pit toilet could be decommissioned because the toilet facilities in Alf's could be used; these are modern facilities which are connected to sewage system. Alf's appears to have existing area for parking 30-40 vehicles without any new disturbance.
d. Light beverages, snacks, and supplies could be sold as an added revenue stream for ASL.
e. Alf's would be a good location to stage high-elevation interpretive programs and serve as a mid-point stop for those walking from the lower Basin area.
f. Restore the current Cecret parking lot and leave a small area for overflow parking from developed campground.
g. Do not develop the new secondary parking lot as now planned under the Supreme lift near the pit toilet.
h. Do not expand the footprint of Alf's although the access road may need some expansion.
i. Provide outside access to toilets if possible.

R6. Other miscellaneous recommendations.

a. Standardize trail signs with names and directions to key points.
b. Inventory and map social trails and begin program to decommission at least 10% each year; experiment with different kind of barriers to impede foot traffic; "Area Closed for Restoration" has been effective elsewhere.
c. Connect the lower Basin trails near the Snake Pit to accommodate a one mile loop trail in the woods and lower creek area.
d. Two-way traffic on Cecret Lake trail adds to the most conflicted area in the Basin; connect the existing trail to the west of the lake towards the Sugarloaf lift to allow for loop trail back to Alf's; encourage one-way hiking.
e. Working with partners, build a robust youth summer environmental interpretation program targeting children under 12 years of age. Adjust displays, signs and presentations to youth- level viewing and comprehension.
f. Local residents should pay the $6 vehicle fee for several reasons. Locals are more familiar with and can access no-fee trail options, they can pass through the fee collection gate before or after hours relatively easier than non-locals, they can afford the fee versus many in the valley, and lastly our federal taxes and budget allocations to the USFS, and other resource management agencies, are no longer sufficient to cover such recreation service programs and we need to rely more on user fees.
g. Establish an Albion Basin Recreation Use Advisory Team with reps from ASL, Town of Alta, Friends of Alta, Save our Canyons, other local organizations, school teacher/administrator, and 2-3 citizens. Primary purpose would be to exchange information, track implementation of management plan, consult on adaptive changes to plan, and to partner on projects.
h. Do not allow and vigorously prosecute (i.e., increase current fine to $75 from $35) people who park along the Albion Basin road outside of designated parking lots.

END OF HAAS REPORT