

Technical Assistance Report

Coconino & Tonto National Forests

Fossil Creek and Sedona Transportation Review

March 2011



This document was prepared for the Coconino & Tonto National Forests by the Paul S. Sarbanes Transit in Parks Technical Assistance Center.

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AUTHOR

This document was authored by David Kack, Program Manager for Mobility and Public Transportation at the Western Transportation Institute of Montana State University, the lead organization of the Paul S. Sarbanes Transit in Parks Technical Assistance Center (TAC).

The Coconino and Tonto National Forests are currently working on the Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River plan. The plan is focused on allowed uses and activities along Fossil Creek. As the Forest Service reviews current and proposed activities along the Creek, it made sense to consider how transportation plays a role in access to Fossil Creek, and how transportation can help balance the demands of visitor access, and resource protection.

In addition to the Fossil Creek WSR plan, the Coconino National Forest is also concerned about recreational access to the National Forest near Sedona. Opportunities also exist to look at alternative transportation options in this area.

As staff for the Paul S. Sarbanes Transit In Parks Technical Assistance Center, David Kack from the Western Transportation Institute traveled to Sedona, Arizona to meet with staff from the Coconino and Tonto National Forests to review existing conditions, discuss possible changes in use patterns/activities, and to provide input on how the transportation system integrates into the Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River plan and the Sedona area.

This document provides an overview of the activities during the visit, and some overall recommendations for moving forward.

Tuesday, January 18, 2011(Sedona Area)

Participants: Lynn Humphrey, Forest Service, Fossil Creek lead; Julie Rowe, Forest Service, Outfitter/Guide Program Planner and Core Area transit lead; Max Licher, Chair of the City of Sedona's Transit Task Force.

Met at the Coconino Forest Service office near the Village of Oak Creek, which is just south of Sedona. The focus of the meeting was to review issues primarily affecting trailheads and access to trails in the greater Sedona area. Max provided an overview of the current transit service within Sedona and the broader region. Transit services are provided by the Northern Arizona Intergovernmental Public Transportation Authority (NAIPTA). Max drew on a map (Figure 1) to illustrate how a public transportation system could serve the Village of Oak Creek, Sedona and West Sedona. Such a service could provide access to many of the most popular trailheads in the area, as well as serve the needs of many local residents.

In the afternoon, there was a field trip to review the trail heads and general area. There were stops at Midgely Bridge and West Fork; as these were locations that had the potential for enhanced transit stops/facilities. The field trip included a drive up Oak Creek Canyon, and parking issues were discussed, as there is limited parking in many areas in the canyon. There was a discussion on working with partners such as the Arizona Department of Transportation, City of Sedona and the retail area of Tlaquepaque. One focus of the discussion was on integrating the topics of public transportation and parking, including a proposed parking structure.

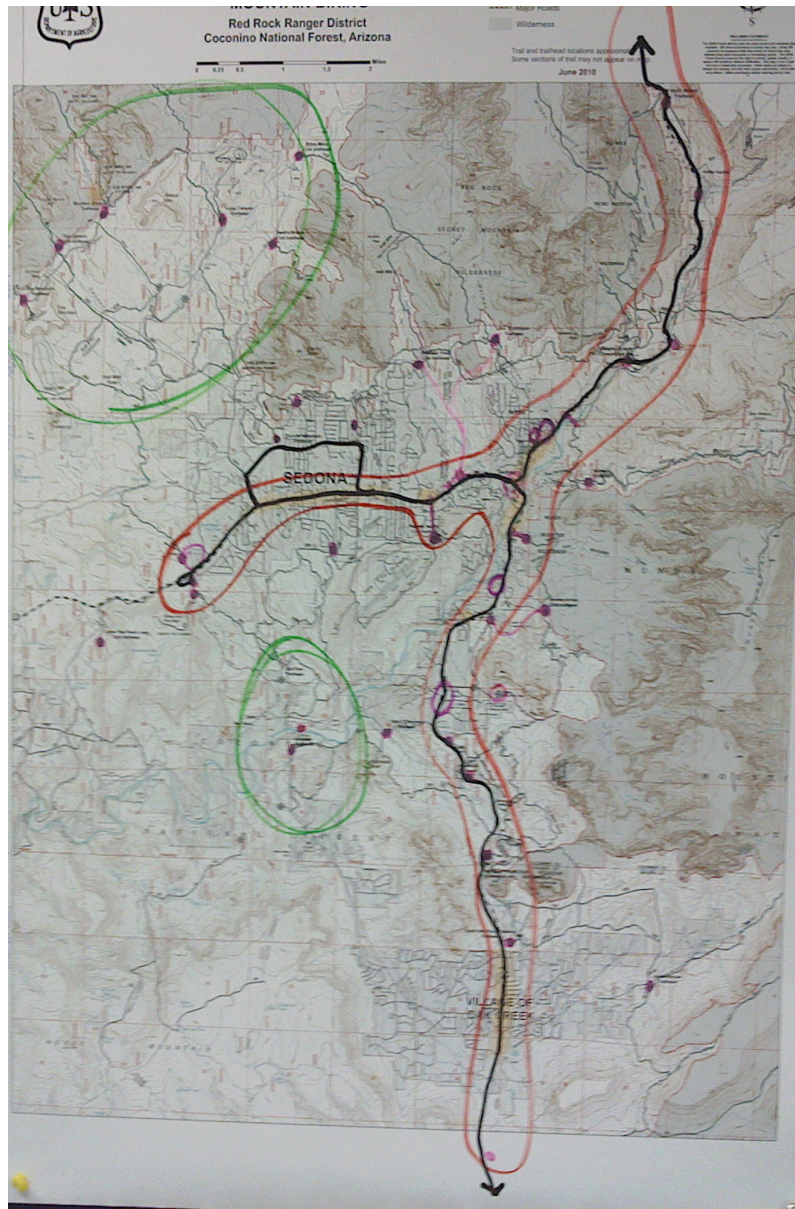


Figure 1: Potential transit service connection to trail heads

Wednesday, January 19, 2011 (Fossil Creek)

Participants: Lynn Humphrey, Forest Service, Fossil Creek lead; Julie Rowe, Forest Service, Outfitter/Guide Program Planner and Core Area transit lead; Dexter Allen, Forest Service, lead patrol ranger; Aaron Rotert, Forest Service, patrol ranger; Chelsea Muise, Forest Service, Payson District recreation officer; Sara Dechter, Forest Service, social science analyst.

Drove from Sedona to Camp Verde and then to Fossil Creek. The route from Camp Verde to Fossil Creek is on Highway 260, and then Fossil Creek Road. Fossil Creek Road is a primitive,

unimproved road. It takes nearly one hour to travel the 14 miles from the Highway 260 junction to Fossil Creek. Fossil Creek Road has many challenges including width, curvature and sight lines. In addition, vehicles driving the road produce significant dust.

It is also possible to access Fossil Creek from the town of Strawberry, Arizona. However, the section of Fossil Creek Road from the Creek to Strawberry was closed. The distance from Fossil Creek to Strawberry is approximately nine miles. However, the road is much steeper; although it is estimated that two-thirds of people travel to Fossil Creek prefer the route from Strawberry.

Thursday, January 20, 2011 (Sedona)

Participants: Lynn Humphrey, Forest Service, Fossil Creek lead; Julie Rowe, Forest Service, Outfitter/Guide Program Planner and Core Area transit lead; Max Licher, Chair of the City of Sedona's Transit Task Force; Jeff Meilbeck, Northern Arizona Intergovernmental Public Transportation Authority (NAIPTA).

Jeff provided information about NAIPTA's operations and funding. Information from the two previous days was shared with Jeff. There was a discussion about how future transit planning could be integrated between NAIPTA and the Forest Service.

David Kack shared information about the Sarbanes program with the participants, and it was noted that the Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) should be released soon. It was agreed that the parties would stay in communication, and it was likely that an application would be submitted to obtain funding for planning purposes. One item discussed was that NAIPTA may be the primary applicant for the planning funds, since they already deal with grants from the Federal Transit Administration.

General Concepts/Information

Sedona Area

The Sedona area enjoys a significant number of tourists, and many of the tourists come to take advantage of the trails and recreational opportunities in the area. A public transportation system that would allow visitors to access trailheads and other amenities in the area without needing their vehicle is possible. There is a core area (Figure 1) that could be the initial phase of a broader transit service. However, the City of Sedona is struggling with determining the value of the current transit service.

A broader discussion between NAIPTA, the City of Sedona, the Coconino Forest, Arizona Department of Transportation and other interested stakeholders could lead to support for a transit system that would serve both visitors and local residents. A planning grant from the Sarbanes program could provide funding for analysis of such a system. The output of the planning grant would likely include specific information on routes, frequency of service, and the level of support needed to initiate, operate and maintain such a system.

Recent transit and parking studies would provide an excellent starting point for a new, integrated planning effort. The new planning effort would also likely include new stakeholders, such as the Forest Service, who may not have been involved before.

Fossil Creek

Parking and traveling along Fossil Creek can be a significant issue during peak use (Figures 2 and 3 and cover photo). As shown in these photos, it can be difficult to maintain a driving lane.



Figure 2: Parking on shoulder of Fossil Creek Road (Source: US Forest Service)



Figure 3: Through traffic issues due to parking on the shoulder (Source: US Forest Service)

Recent data from the Forest Service indicates a significant increase in the number of people using the Fossil Creek area since 2005. The data shows that the highest use is on weekends during the summer months (May-September). It is during this time that people are coming to Fossil Creek to escape the heat of the surrounding areas (58% of visitors are from the Phoenix metro area and 13% from Prescott).

The maximum number of people at one time estimated in the Fossil Creek area on its busiest day was 1,100 people. However, as indicated by data and shown visually in Figures 2 and 3 and the cover photo, parking is a major issue. Therefore, a solution that will allow access while protecting important resources is critical.

After the site visit to Fossil Creek and discussion with Forest Service staff, it appears that a solution that includes a parking reservation system and park & ride service is the most feasible solution. While a further study and planning is recommended, the following provides a synopsis of this potential solution.

Forest Service data indicated that visitors traveled with approximately three individuals per car. Therefore, to accommodate a maximum of 1,200 people at one time, a maximum of 400 cars ($1,200 \text{ people} / 3 \text{ people per car} = 400 \text{ cars}$) needs to be accommodated. There is general agreement that approximately 100 parking spaces could be delineated in the Fossil Creek area. That means approximately 900 people, or 300 carloads of people, would need to access Fossil Creek through a shuttle service or park & ride system.

As noted earlier, the road from Strawberry and Camp Verde (the Highway 260/Fossil Creek Road intersection) to Fossil Creek is very primitive. Given the road conditions, it is most feasible to put the park and ride lots as close to Fossil Creek as possible. Further planning would identify such locations and their capacity. Data indicates that approximately two-thirds of visitors access Fossil Creek from the east (Strawberry); therefore, the park and ride facility/system at Strawberry would need to have the capacity for 200 cars and 600 people (Table 1).

Table 1: Park & Ride Calculations

Item	# of Cars	# of People	Notes
Carrying Capacity	400	1200	3 people per car
Fossil Creek Parking	100	300	Estimate
Balance	300	900	Need alternative mode of access
Park & Ride Strawberry	200	600	Two-thirds of balance
Park & Ride Camp Verde	100	300	One-third of balance

Due to the fact that many people drive at least two hours to access Fossil Creek, it is recommended that a reservation system be implemented for both the parking and park & ride systems so that individuals would know that they can access Fossil Creek. The reservation system would also allow the Forest Service to actively manage access to the area, as the number of parking and park & ride slots could be increased or decreased depending upon critical factors such as resource conditions, weather, etc.

In addition to the shuttle service provided from the park & ride lots to Fossil Creek, it was discussed that a circulator/shuttle along Fossil Creek would limit traffic on Fossil Creek Road, as people would be required to remain parked at their designated spot until departing the area. This concept/service would be further refined in the proposed transportation plan.

Conclusions and Recommendations

David Kack traveled to the Sedona area to provide transportation-related technical assistance on behalf of the Paul S. Sarbanes Transit in Parks Technical Assistance Center (TAC). The technical assistance was requested due to the fact that the Coconino and Tonto National Forests are working on the Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive River Management Plan. With current planning efforts underway, it makes sense to integrate transportation/access issues into the larger management discussion.

In addition to the planning in the Fossil Creek area, the Coconino National Forest surrounds the Sedona area, and there is an extensive trail network in and around Sedona. A discussion of providing access to the trailheads also was part of the technical assistance.

While the purpose of the visit was not to determine specific solutions to the transportation issues in the Sedona and Fossil Creek areas, enough information was gathered to provide the following recommendations:

- 1) Transportation planning should be incorporated into the Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive River Management Plan. As noted herein, use of Fossil Creek has increased significantly since 2005, and parking management is a major issue. Transportation management can complement the other management/use decisions made by the Forest Service.
- 2) The City of Sedona is reviewing its current transit services, and the Forest Service can partner with the City to determine how to most effectively and efficiently move people between key origins and destinations within the Sedona area, recognizing that many destinations include trailheads and other Forest Service lands.
- 3) Working with all relevant stakeholders is important. Staff from the Coconino and Tonto National Forests should work with relevant stakeholders to develop a comprehensive transportation plan that addresses the greater Sedona area, as well as the gateway communities to Fossil Creek (Camp Verde and Strawberry). Potential stakeholders/partners include the Arizona Department of Transportation, the City of Sedona, and the Northern Arizona Intergovernmental Public Transportation Authority.

- 4) The Coconino and Tonto National Forests should apply for planning funding through the Paul S. Sarbanes Transit In Parks Program (Federal Transit Administration Section 5320 funding). Information was shared with Forest Service staff during the visit, and the TAC will be providing trainings on apply for funding. More information about the Sarbanes program can be found on the Federal Transit Administration's website, http://www.fta.dot.gov/funding/grants/grants_financing_6106.html

In summary, a transportation plan would complement the work being done to complete the Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive River Management Plan, and tie the allowed activities/uses in the Fossil Creek area to how people access the area. Further, the transportation plan would show how people may access the trailheads in the Sedona area without having to use their own vehicle.

