
Introduction

The Federal Highway Administration Central Federal Lands Highway Division (FHWA-CFLHD), in coordination with the USDA Forest Service, Salt Lake County, and Millcreek, is proposing improvements to Mill Creek Canyon Road. The Upper Mill Creek Canyon Road Improvements Project begins at the Winter Gate and proceeds east 4.5 miles to the Upper Big Water Trailhead.

Public Outreach and Comments Received

The project team hosted a third open house (Meeting 3), both virtually and in person, on June 13 and 14, 2023, respectively. The purpose of the meetings was to present a project overview, share preliminary design updates, discuss activities completed to date, review newly released environmental documents, and gather input from the public. A follow-up question and answer session was held virtually on June 21, 2023 since technical difficulties were experienced in the June 13 virtual meeting. Notice for the public open house was provided via the Salt Lake Tribune, social media, and Salt Lake County's project website. Public comments were accepted from June 4, 2023 to July 10, 2023. The original 30-day comment period was extended due to the Fourth of July holiday. The office of Regional Development received a total of 196 comments during this period through the online form, email, physical comment cards, and mailed in letters. This also includes comments and questions asked during Meeting 3.

The purpose of this document is to provide an overview of the comments received and responses to those comments. Many of the public comments and concerns were similar to those received during the comment periods associated with the first two open houses. Comments and concerns received during the acceptance period associated with Meeting 3 were grouped into the following themes:

- Parking
- Road Width (Aesthetics)
- Lane Width (Traffic Speed)
- Road Geometry
- Bike Lanes and Cyclist Safety
- Bathrooms and Infrastructure
- Retaining Walls
- Firs Cabin Owner Concerns
- Construction Duration
- Environmental Considerations
- Communication
- Operational Considerations
- Process Recommendations

The intent of ongoing public engagement is to listen to public concerns related to this project and allow the project team to address those concerns through the preliminary engineering design and environmental assessment processes, to the extent practicable. As described below in the comment responses, the project team will use public input to design the project in a way that provides the best balance across different, and often competing, interests. FHWA-CFLHD will also address resource concerns through its environmental assessment process.

Comment Summaries and Comment Responses

Comment summaries and responses associated with the above themes are included in the table beginning on the following page.

Comment Summaries and Responses

Parking

Comment Summary: Parking-related comments included support for the plan, requests for more parking than indicated in the plans, and requests for less parking than indicated in the plan. Specific concerns were related to decreased access as informal roadside parking spaces are relocated, fear that the proposed parking plan will draw more visitors to the canyon, the impact of the proposed parking plan on the canyon's aesthetics, and potential congestion at parking lots and resulting impacts to cyclists and pedestrians.

Response: The project team understands the range of parking-related concerns expressed during this comment period and continues to consider options to eliminate existing informal roadside parking areas and generally maintain the current overall parking capacity by increasing parking capacity at existing trailheads.

Increasing parking capacity within the canyon is not a project objective. The intent of the project relative to parking is to approximately maintain the current overall parking capacity in the canyon while improving public safety and limiting impacts to natural resources. Informal roadside parking poses a safety hazard to pedestrians, bicyclists, and vehicles in the travel lanes; tends to encroach on and damage vegetation; leads to erosion; and typically results in other impacts to natural resources (e.g., negative impacts to water quality). Informal parking areas also typically lead to informal, user-created, or "spider" trails as visitors hike to their destination from their parked vehicle.

- Elimination of informal roadside parking areas will keep vehicles from parking on the shoulder. These cars often encroach on travel lanes, which results in a narrower effective roadway and unsafe conditions for cyclists and automobiles.
- Moving existing informal parking capacity to redesigned, formal parking areas such as the Big Water Trailhead will concentrate parked vehicles in areas designed to manage and minimize parking related impacts to natural resources through hardened surfaces, proper drainage, and other best management practices for managing surface water runoff.
- Concentrating parked vehicles in specified areas will also reduce human impacts, including informal trails, by allowing visitors to park in areas with direct access to Forest Service System trails and restrooms.

We acknowledge the need for sufficient parking to accommodate visitors, but also recognize the importance of limiting our footprint on the natural environment. Please know that the proposal is not final, and modifications may be made based on public input. We will continue to review the Forest Plan and existing data on vehicle usage and parking patterns in the canyon to inform our decisions, and we will strive to ensure that any changes will reduce long-term impacts the canyon's wildlife, vegetation, and water resources.

As we proceed, we will consider the diverse needs and perspectives of all stakeholders, including cyclists, anglers, and those who enjoy the serenity of the canyon. We value your input and encourage everyone to stay engaged in this process. Thank you again for your comments and commitment to preserving the beauty and accessibility of Mill Creek Canyon.

Road Width (Aesthetics)

Comment Summary: Several comments were received that mentioned concerns about the proposed road widths. Most of these commenters expressed concerns that a wider road will detract from the aesthetics and feel of the canyon. Other commenters expressed support to widen the road, noting that it has been needed for some time.

Response: We understand and respect your concerns about maintaining the natural beauty and tranquil atmosphere of the canyon. We want to reassure you that our primary goal is to promote safety and accessibility while preserving the area's unique character. The road design has already been narrowed from its initial concept in response to concerns about the projects impacts on the aesthetics and character of the canyon. The preliminary design widens several areas where the roadway narrows to a single lane to improve safety and traffic flow.

Balancing the need for improvements with preservation of the canyon's aesthetics is a challenge we take seriously. We appreciate your suggestions and will continue to consider them as we refine our plans. Thank you for your engagement in this process.

Lane Width (Traffic Speed)

Comment Summary: Several comments were received that mentioned concerns about the proposed lane widths and corresponding vehicle speeds. Most of these comments were in favor of keeping travel lanes narrow to encourage slower vehicle speeds, which commenters viewed as safer for cyclists and pedestrians and more aligned with the feel of the canyon. Some commenters favored the wider (10-foot minimum) lanes and wanted them maintained for the length of the project. One comment recommended the use of rumble strips to encourage slower speeds.

Response: Thank you for sharing your concerns and suggestions about the proposed lane widths for the Upper Mill Creek Canyon Road Improvements Project. We understand that lane widths can significantly impact speed, safety, and the overall experience for all canyon users. Your feedback is crucial as we strive to balance accessibility, safety, and preservation of the canyon's natural environment. We also strive to design for a consistent user experience, which facilitates safety as users are better able to anticipate their experience as they travel through the canyon. Be assured that we are taking all these factors into account as we continue to refine our plans.

Mill Creek Canyon Road needs to allow for passage of emergency service vehicles. Per the United Fire Authority, fire trucks measure 8.5 feet across the front bumper. The sideview mirrors extend an additional six inches on each side of the truck, for a total truck width of 9.5 feet. In the event of an emergency, first responders need to be able to travel safely and efficiently through the canyon. In the case of a wildfire emergency, road widths need to accommodate emergency vehicle access while canyon users are simultaneously evacuating the canyon.

The project team is analyzing multiple concepts that include a variety of lane widths. There are tradeoffs as narrower lanes increase the potential for accidents and increase emergency response times, and wider lanes tend to result in greater environmental impacts and increased construction costs. The design team will continue to weigh these tradeoffs, including tradeoffs associated with consistent lane width, and consider public opinions on lane widths as the design is refined. We thank you for your input in the project development process as we aim to balance driver safety, cyclist and pedestrian safety, emergency service provider access, and canyon aesthetics.

Road Geometry

Comment Summary: Some commenters expressed concerns that the proposed road geometry changes (e.g., straightening to increase sight distance) will result in increased vehicle speeds, reduced user safety, and undesirable aesthetic impacts. One commenter asked if the safety concerns at the center of this project are based on actual accidents and incident statistics in the upper canyon, and if so, requested this information.

Response: Thank you for sharing your concerns and suggestions about the proposed alignment alterations for the Upper Mill Creek Canyon Road Improvements Project. We understand that road geometry can impact vehicle speeds, user safety, and the look and feel of the canyon.

Your comments highlight the importance of clear communication about what our proposed changes entail. "Curve widening" and "sight distance improvements" are measures intended to improve safety, and we appreciate that these changes must be balanced with the current character of the canyon and the needs of all users, including cyclists and pedestrians. These alterations will generally be minor and focused on the sharpest corners with the most limited sight distances. We hear your desire to keep the road winding and consider the impact of straighter, wider lanes on vehicle speeds. We are committed to ensuring that any improvements made do not compromise safety but enhance it.

Analysis of crash data was performed by the project team by evaluating publicly available crash data from Salt Lake County and Utah Department of Transportation as well as data presented in the 2012 Mill Creek Canyon Transportation Feasibility Study. Analysis of the data included crash locations, severity, type, and total crashes, depending on data availability; and, summarizing key findings, conclusions, and recommendations, such as potential safety countermeasures, to address findings of the analysis.

Bike Lanes and Cyclist Safety

Comment Summary: Many comments were received concerning the proposed bike lanes and impacts to cyclist safety. Comments included requests to widen the bike lanes, extend them for the entire length of the roadway (to Little Water Trailhead), construct a separate bike path up the canyon, and to stripe the road and bike path in a way that reduces vehicle speeds while maintaining bike lanes. One commenter was concerned that cyclists were being prioritized over motorists, and some were concerned that a wider road with wide bike lanes would result in increased vehicle speeds and a corresponding decrease in cyclist safety.

Response: Thank you for providing your valuable insights and suggestions regarding the proposed bike lanes as part of the Upper Mill Creek Canyon Road Improvements. Cycling is an important aspect of the canyon experience for many visitors, and we appreciate your thoughtful input on how to safely enhance this recreation while maintaining the aesthetic qualities and character of the canyon.

As stated above, the project team is analyzing multiple concepts that include different roadway widths and lane configurations. A wider roadway allows more space for motorists and cyclists; however, it can also result in greater environmental impacts. Multiple concepts are being developed to better balance motorist needs, cyclist needs, and environmental impacts while emphasizing user safety. Related safety considerations beyond roadway width and bike lanes include eliminating informal parking areas and installing signing and striping.

Elimination of informal roadside parking areas (described previously) will keep vehicles from parking on the shoulder. These cars often encroach on travel lanes, which results in a narrower effective roadway and unsafe conditions for cyclists. Other design elements are also being considered to increase cyclist and pedestrian safety, including striped crosswalks, flashing signs in high traffic areas, and informational and warning signs where cyclists and pedestrians are likely to be present.

We are considering all feedback, including the desire for more extensive bike lanes, the need for safety measures, and the balance between catering to cyclists and other users. Your specific suggestions such as tool stations, signage, use of thermoplastics instead of paint for road striping and markings, and international striping examples are greatly appreciated and will be examined closely. Please know that our priority is to create a safe and enjoyable environment for all users while preserving the natural beauty of the canyon. We thank you for your comments and will keep your feedback in mind as we proceed.

Bathrooms and Infrastructure

Comment Summary: Comments received were supportive of proposed bathrooms and stormwater management features. One commenter asked why stormwater infiltration was not included in the White Bridge parking lot area.

Response: Thank you for your feedback on the proposed Upper Mill Creek Canyon Road Improvements Project, particularly regarding the addition of swales, detention basins, and bathrooms as part of the infrastructure upgrades. We appreciate your acknowledgement of our stormwater management efforts and your suggestion for a similar feature at the White Bridge parking lot will be taken into consideration. Similarly, your support for improved restroom facilities aligns with our commitment to enhance the visitor experience while reducing environmental impacts.

Retaining Walls

Comment Summary: Multiple commenters mentioned concerns related to retaining walls, generally requesting that wall heights and the visual impact of retaining walls be limited. Other comments expressed a preference for rockery walls over soil-nail walls, requested that retaining walls visible from the Firs cabins be minimized, and requested more information on the locations of retaining walls along the roadway.

Response: Thank you for sharing your perspectives on the use of retaining walls in the proposed Upper Mill Creek Canyon Road Improvements Project. We understand your concerns about maintaining the natural aesthetic of the canyon and minimizing the visual impact of artificial structures. We also acknowledge your desire to limit the visibility of retaining walls from the Firs cabin area.

The use of retaining walls helps limit the project footprint (i.e., decreases the need for large cuts and fills), which tends to decrease environmental impacts and facilitate other project objectives. Please be assured that we will consider your feedback as we refine our plans and balance various interests. Our goal is to strike a balance between implementing the necessary road improvements, environmental protection, and preserving the natural charm of Mill Creek Canyon.

Firs Cabin Owner Concerns

Comment Summary: Lease holders at the 24-cabin Firs tract expressed several concerns during this comment period. Concerns were primarily related to:

1. Access limitations during construction, with suggestions to provide more weekend access, more work in the early winter, require a bidding option that increases cabin access, and set up a system to communicate with cabin owners during construction.
2. County taxation of Firs properties during the period(s) when they are inaccessible by vehicle.

3. Visibility of cabins due to vegetation removal.
4. Changes to the level of noise pollution.
5. Ensuring the design includes sufficient space between the Firs access gate and road so vehicles do not encroach on the roadway when opening and closing the gate.

Response: The project team is considering schedule constraints and restrictions that will become part of the construction contract and will attempt to balance delays and access concerns with all canyon users. The Recreation Resident Special Use Permits do not require the Forest Service to provide motorized access for cabin owners in the Firs Cabins tract. The Forest Service has the right to limit access when necessary. This project is considered necessary to address safety and infrastructure needs. FHWA-CFLHD and the Forest Service will work together during construction to potentially provide limited access during the construction season to perform cabin maintenance, if feasible, safe, and if it does not delay construction activities.

At the USFS meeting with the Firs Summer Home Association on Monday, May 12, 2023 at the Millcreek Library, a request was made by several cabin owners requesting that the County waive payment of property taxes on individual cabins for the two construction seasons (2025/2026) while the Upper Mill Creek Canyon Road Improvement Project, a Federal Lands Access Program (FLAP) Project is actively working on roadway reconstruction and other improvements. After consulting with both the Salt Lake County Assessor Chris Stavros and attorneys in the Salt Lake County District Attorney's Office, the County unfortunately does not have authority to waive property taxes under these circumstances.

Under Article XIII, Section 2(1) of the Utah Constitution, the County Assessor is required to assess all tangible property in the County at its fair market value unless there is a specific exemption listed in the Utah Constitution. There is unfortunately not an exemption for property that has its access cut off because of construction. Accordingly, the County Assessor is required to assess the property at its fair market value. However, the Assessor should and will take into account the effects of the construction on the value of the properties for the tax years the construction is in effect. Also, the Utah Constitution does have an exemption for indigent individuals and Salt Lake County has property tax relief programs for low income individuals that can be reviewed at <https://slco.org/treasurer/tax-relief/>. In addition, if any of the cabin owners have comparable sales of properties where the access has been temporarily cut off or other information about how the construction will affect the value of their property, the County Assessor would welcome that information. That information can be provided to Helen Peters at hpeters@slco.org and she will forward it to County Assessor Stavros.

The Forest Service has pledged to help lessees receive exemptions on federal cabin fees during construction years.

During the environmental review process, FHWA-CFLHD will consider social, economic, and environmental effects of the project, including impacts to scenery and noise pollution. Preservation of the existing viewshed and soundscape will be maintained or enhanced where feasible and consistent with project objectives.

The proximity of the Firs access gate to the roadway will be considered as design progresses. Thank you for bringing this item to our attention.

Construction Duration

Comment Summary: Comments received pertaining to construction duration generally questioned the need for construction to span two seasons. One suggestion was to divide the project into an upper and lower portion so that the lower portion could remain open for one of the construction seasons.

Response: Thank you for sharing your concerns and suggestions about the construction timeline for the proposed Upper Mill Creek Canyon Road Improvements Project. We understand that minimizing disruption and completing the project efficiently is important to the community. Your suggestion to divide the project into two phases will be taken into consideration. We understand the concern about the potential closure for two seasons. Please be assured that if such a closure becomes necessary, we would strive to ensure work is completed as quickly and efficiently as possible while maintaining high standards for quality and safety.

Again, we appreciate your input and patience as we continue to refine our plans for this important project. Your engagement is crucial in helping us make the best decisions for the community. Thank you.

Environmental Considerations

Comment Summary: Commenters expressed environmental concerns related to a variety of resources and potential impacts, including:

- Impacts to the creek, its trout, and the surrounding riparian area,
- Preservation of large trees,
- Erosion at road shoulders and other disturbed areas,
- Temporary dewatering of side streams,
- Fear that the project will result in more traffic, more people, and more pollution,
- General impression that biological concerns are not being adequately considered,
- Impacts to the creek and natural springs above Elbow Fork,
- Impacts to historic and cultural artifacts (e.g., hydroelectric systems, sawmills, and Indigenous artifacts),
- Preservation of the roadside vegetation and tree canopies, and
- Impacts to the Thousand Springs area.

Response: Thank you for sharing your thoughtful concerns and suggestions regarding environmental impacts associated with the proposed Upper Mill Creek Canyon Road Improvements Project. We understand the importance of preserving the natural beauty, ecosystem, and historical artifacts in the canyon.

Your comments highlight crucial points about protecting habitats, minimizing erosion, reducing pollution, protecting water quality, and preserving large trees, roadside vegetation, and tree canopies that contribute to the current feel of Mill Creek Canyon. We acknowledge your concerns about the potential impacts on the creek, trout population, and riparian zone. We also appreciate your suggestions to leave the north side vegetation intact, carefully consider shoulder treatments, and avoid impacting artifacts of cultural and historical significance.

Please be assured that we will take these concerns seriously as we refine our plans and prepare an environmental assessment for the proposed project. The environmental assessment will evaluate these potential impacts and more in detail, and the environmental assessment process will include an additional opportunity for public involvement. +

Additionally, the State of Utah's Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office has reviewed the biological resources report and cultural resources report for the project, does not have any concerns with report findings, found the project to be consistent with the policies and objectives of both the Utah State Resource Management Plan and Salt Lake County Resource Management Plan, and supports the proposed project. Our goal is to balance necessary improvements with preservation of the canyon's natural and historical assets, wildfire protection needs, and other desired outcomes, and the environmental assessment process is intended to help support this goal.

Communication

Comment Summary: Commenters expressed interest in increasing cellular phone service in the canyon, generally requesting additional cell towers while questioning the need for the proposed conduit installation.

Response: Thank you for your comments regarding the need for improved cellular phone service in Mill Creek Canyon. We understand how crucial reliable communication can be, particularly in emergency situations.

While installation of new cell towers is beyond the scope of this project, we are taking steps to install communications conduits beneath the new roadway to improve the future communications potential within the canyon.

We thank you for your comments and will pass along your feedback to those who manage communications infrastructure in the area.

Operational Considerations

Comment Summary: Operational comments centered around ways to manage use and limit/control traffic and crowds. Suggestions included:

- Adding a toll to the road,
- Limiting vehicles,
- Implementing a shuttle system,
- Increasing enforcement of dog-related laws,
- Incentivizing use during non-peak hours,

- Adding a notification system to inform motorists when parking areas are full,
- Installing automated speed enforcement cameras,
- Creating a recreational use plan for the canyon, and
- Implementing a reservation system for parking spots.

There were also comments both for and against implementing an every-other-day vehicle closure.

Response: Many of the comments pertained to operational changes, future canyon access management, and alternative operation solutions like a shuttle system. These aspects, while important, are beyond the scope of this project. However, they have been noted for future consideration in our long-term planning.

In this project, our primary focus remains on making necessary roadway infrastructure improvements to enhance safety and accessibility. With that said, we are also looking ahead. We are designing these improvements with the future in mind, including potential areas for shuttle stops and conduits that could support future telecommunication enhancements and improved in-canyon connectivity.

Process Recommendations

Comment Summary: One commenter suggested posting project information at the Winter Gate to better inform existing users about the project and how they can get involved in the planning process. Another commenter requested close coordination with the Salt Lake City Department of Public Utilities (SLCDPU) to attempt to coordinate the Mill Creek Canyon closure with the pending closure of City Creek Canyon during reconstruction of the water treatment plant.

Response: Thank you for these suggestions. The project team has engaged in several public involvement efforts and will consider adding signage at the Winter Gate area to inform users of upcoming public involvement opportunities. We also appreciate the notification of the pending closure of City Creek Canyon and understand that it is undesirable to have both canyons closed at the same time. The project team will attempt to coordinate these closures with SLCDPU.

In addition to the above comments, we received several positive comments that were supportive of the project and appreciative of the public involvement opportunities. We are deeply appreciative of the many positive responses received regarding the Upper Mill Creek Canyon Road Improvement Project. Your feedback is invaluable to us and it is heartening to know that our planning process has been well-received by a portion of the public. Your positivity and support fuels our commitment to improving our community. Thank you!

Future Opportunities to Provide Input and the NEPA Process

The series of three public open houses is now complete. We will use the public input obtained in these meetings and their associated comment periods to complete the design and prepare an environmental assessment. We plan to publish a draft environmental assessment document in early 2024, after which the public will have 30 days to comment on the report. Following this comment period, we will make any necessary changes and FHWA-CFLHD will decide if constructing the project as planned will significantly affect the environment.

If FHWA-CFLHD determines that the project will not result in significant environmental effects, they will issue a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and a decision notice explaining the rationale for the decision, and this would conclude the NEPA process. If significant environmental effects are likely or remain uncertain, the agency may proceed with preparing an environmental impact statement to further assess potential social, environmental, and economic effects.

Notification of issuance of the draft environmental assessment will be advertised via the Salt Lake Tribune, social media, and the project website (<https://slco.org/millcreekcanyon>), and direct emails will be sent to all individuals who previously provided input and an email address.