



1. PROJECT PURPOSE & BACKGROUND

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At Fire Island National Seashore, the National Park Service (NPS) is currently developing a general management plan (GMP). At the core of this effort is a commitment to pursuing a management approach that emphasizes the cooperative stewardship of Fire Island – everyone has a role to play in ensuring the protection of this special place for generations to come. In order to achieve this, the planning team, the park and its many stakeholders must understand and appreciate the full breadth of resources and values that define Fire Island – both public and private.

Within the boundaries of Fire Island National Seashore (the Seashore) are 17 communities that were allowed to remain after the establishment of the park as long as they adopted zoning regulations consistent with standards provided by the Secretary of the Interior and that have been approved by the Secretary. Local zoning codes were approved by the Secretary in 1985. While management policies and practices that guide the Seashore can have an effect on Island communities, land management policies and practices within the communities can likewise have an effect on the seashore's resources.

As part of the GMP effort, NPS engaged a consulting firm, A. Nelessen and Associates (ANA) to prepare an analysis and description of the physical features, both cultural and natural, that define Fire Island and its 17 distinct private communities. The consultant is working with community residents and other stakeholders Island-wide to identify and describe these resources and values and define a long-term vision addressing them. The purpose of this Island-wide analysis is to provide baseline information so the National Park Service can better understand what residents value about the natural and built environment in their communities and their concerns for those things. By doing so, the NPS will be better able to evaluate any possible impacts resulting from alternatives proposed in the GMP and work with the communities and other management partners to consider the best possible solutions to address them.

The first phase of the project began in earnest in February 2009 when Tony Nelessen, principle of A. Nelessen Associates, and his staff made their initial site visit to Fire Island. By the summer, a project web site was launched and a “photo safari” project was introduced to the public to assemble community images for use in the community character analysis project. Local residents and visitors were invited to submit images of the Island that they thought best represented things that they loved and would like to see preserved as well as those images representing things that were out of character or should not continue.

In early August 2009, Tony Nelessen joined park staff and a small group of community stakeholders to discuss the next step for the project – how and when to engage the larger community in an exercise to rate the images that had been assembled. It was determined that a community meeting before the end of the summer would come too soon and the community stakeholders also expressed concerns that a workshop format simply would not work for this purpose. They also requested that the deadline for submitting images be extended.

In response, the deadline for submitting images was extended to the end of September and Tony Nelessen suggested a web-based strategy that would enable people to participate whenever and wherever it was convenient for them to rate the various images assembled for the project. In early November, the gallery of images was made available and the Fire Island community was invited to go on-line and participate in rating the images and also respond to some demographic, policy and market questions. The on-line project was originally slated to end on December 18th, but in response to community requests was extended to January 15, 2010. A total of 545 people participated in the on-line Visual Preference Exercise from November 2009 through January 2010.

The following report describes the mechanics of the on-line Visual Preference exercise and describes its preliminary outcome. Further discussion with community stakeholders is necessary before A. Nelessen and Associates can make their final findings and recommendations.