

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

NORTHWEST ARCTIC HERITAGE CENTER

KOTZEBUE, ALASKA

The National Park Service (NPS) has prepared an environmental assessment (EA) on the development of the Northwest Arctic Heritage Center on a 0.75 acre site in Kotzebue, Alaska. The Heritage Center would be located at the west end of Third Avenue in Kotzebue, Alaska on lands to be acquired by the NPS as detailed in the "Property Acquisition in Kotzebue, Alaska" EA, June 2002.

The NPS would renovate and/or construct a Heritage Center with associated parking on land located at the west end of Third Avenue (specifically, Tract A, Lots 6, 7, 8 and 9, Block 11, US Survey 2863A) in Kotzebue, Alaska. The site includes Lots 6, 7, and 8 and contains a 19,035 square-foot multi-purpose building owned by the Northwest Arctic Native Association (NANA). The site would be purchased by the NPS. The action is contingent upon the successful purchase of Lot 9 owned by the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities.

Under various design scenarios the building would either be renovated; partially renovated and partially demolished to make possible new construction; or completely demolished and a new structure built. A value analysis completed in December 2002 recommended substantial demolition of the existing structure with primarily new construction. The footprint of the building would cover most of Lots 6-8 with an overall building size of approximately 23,000 square feet or less. Parking would be incorporated on Lot 9.

The Heritage Center would provide visitor services, fulfill administrative functions and serve as an educational and cultural center for the local and surrounding communities. The Centers' uses will include visitor orientation and trip planning, interpretive exhibits, a cultural demonstration area, auditorium, sales area, multi-purpose classroom, cultural sharing workshops, and interactive computer stations. It would also serve administrative needs by providing reception and office space, conference and meeting space, computer and communications support and administrative and curatorial storage.

The purpose of this project would be to design and construct visitor and administrative facilities and associated parking that meets the current and future needs of the park and its partners, the visiting public and local communities. These needs include providing orientation, information and trip planning to visitors, environmental and cultural educational opportunities for local residents and nearby communities and administrative facilities to enhance park operations. These needs are not being adequately met by current facilities.

Public Involvement

The EA had a 30-day public comment period beginning February 28, 2003 and ending March 28, 2003. Public notice of the availability of the EA was published in the Arctic Sounder and posted on local bulletin boards. The EA was mailed to 12 agencies, organizations, and individuals. No comments were received on this project.

Alternatives

The EA evaluated the no-action alternative in addition to the NPS preferred alternative. Under the on-action alternative the NPS would continue to use its existing facilities in the City of Kotzebue. There would be no expansion of existing facilities. The property being considered for development would be acquired by the NPS but remain in its current state and maintain its present uses.

Mitigating Measures

Mitigation to be taken in conjunction with implementing the NPS preferred alternative include:

Contaminants and Hazardous Substances: As part of the mitigating measures outlined in the Property Acquisition EA, any hazardous materials identified on the property would be removed prior to acquisition. Additionally, as part of a pre-acquisition environmental assessment, it was determined that small quantities of hazardous waste generation likely occurred on the property. Through groundbreaking activities (earthmoving, major landscaping, and geophysical or subsurface studies) the site would be visually inspected for further evidence of any soil and/or groundwater contamination by pollutants, contaminants or hazardous substances. If contamination were encountered, appropriate notification and remedial action would be taken to ensure compliance with all applicable federal, state, and local government environmental statutes and regulations.

Landscaping: Landscaping would incorporate native plants & grasses onto the site.

Cultural Resources: The proposed site falls within the Kotzebue Archeological District and the area known as Old Kotzebue. While no historic structures are contained on the site the area has been determined eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. Additionally, archeological investigations have revealed sites and objects of significance within the general vicinity. While preliminary testing of the site did not yield much of significance the proposed undertaking would proceed in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended (NHPA) as well as with consideration for all Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) regulations.

Land Use and Building Codes: The proposed development would meet all City of Kotzebue Planning and Land Use requirements. Parking for the Heritage Center would meet Kotzebue parking guidelines for office and public assembly buildings. Both the facility and parking would meet all Americans with Disabilities Act requirements.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

The "No Action Alternative" is the environmentally preferred alternative, because no further excavation or vegetation clearing would occur under this alternative. However, the fact that the property is already developed minimizes the environmental impacts of further disturbance resulting from renovation and/or construction. Additionally, the renovation and/or construction of a new heritage center may ameliorate these effects by providing infrastructure that would better protect, preserve and enhance historic, cultural and natural resources within the park as well as the city of Kotzebue and surrounding communities.

Environmental Consequences of the NPS Preferred Alternative

As documented in the EA, the NPS has determined that the NPS Preferred Alternative can be implemented with no significant adverse effect to natural or cultural resources. The effects of the NPS preferred alternative are summarized below.

The only resource impacted by the action would be vegetation, including wetland vegetation. The 0.23 acres of non-jurisdictional palustrine unconsolidated bottom, cobble/gravel, seasonally flooded wetland beneath the multi-purpose NANA building has already been severely compromised and provides minimal wetland functions. Because of its current condition, draining or filling this wetland as part of the proposal would, for all purposes, have no additional wetland impacts. The only wetland impacts resulting from this proposal would be the loss of the 0.02 acres of jurisdictional palustrine emergent persistent saturated wetland on the extreme southern end of the property. Given the disturbed nature of this wetland and limited value in terms of functions served, the permanent loss of this amount is considered a negligible adverse impact on wetland vegetation.

The multi-purpose NANA building has been determined ineligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places and so any modification or demolition to the structure under this proposal would not be considered to effect Cultural Resources. Additionally, an archeological investigation of the site conducted during the summer of 2002 determined that projects on this property would be expected to have no significant effect on cultural resources.

Because the property is currently a site that is utilized by the tourist industry and also serves as office space, this alternative would not change the land use that the property is currently experiencing. The development would fulfill the City's land use plan for that area.

This proposal is expected to have a positive effect on visitor experience by providing improved visitor services and greater educational and interpretive opportunities for both tourists and local residents.

Decision

The NPS has decided to select the NPS preferred alternative, which will involve the renovation and/or construction of a Heritage Center with associated parking in Kotzebue, Alaska.

Rationale for the decision

The 1986 General Management Plan (GMP) for Cape Krusenstern National Monument called for the construction of several new NPS facilities in Kotzebue, Alaska. They included a visitor contact facility, a museum, administrative offices and equipment storage. When considering new development, the 1986 GMP encouraged the NPS to comply with section 1306 of the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). Section 1306 authorizes the Secretary of the Interior and federal agencies to attempt to locate sites and facilities on Native lands in the vicinity of the park unit to the extent practicable and desirable. Furthermore, the GMP identified NANA as one of several possible cooperators in funding the construction and

operation of a museum in Kotzebue. The GMP also stated that consideration would be given to combining the NPS visitor contact station and the museum into a single building in order to lower construction, maintenance and operational costs and offer a single visitor destination. The NPS preferred alternative meets the objectives of the Parks GMP by providing co-located facilities in Kotzebue in partnership with NANA.


Though the "No Action" alternative is the environmentally preferred alternative it was not selected for implementation because it would not meet the project's purpose or goals of the GMP.

As indicated, the adverse impacts of the construction of the Heritage Center will be negligible and will not result in an impairment of park resources that fulfill specific purposes identified in the establishing legislation or that are key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park including the NPS Organic Act.

The NPS preferred alternative complies with the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and Executive Orders 11988, and 11990. There will be no significant restriction of subsistence activities as documented by the National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Title 8, Section 810 (a) Summary Evaluation and Findings.

I find that the NPS preferred alternative does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and regulations of the council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1508.9), an environmental impact statement will not be prepared for the project.


Recommended:



David W. Spirtes
Superintendent, Western Arctic National Parklands

4/9/03
Date

Approved:



 Robert L. Arnberger
Regional Director, Alaska

4/15/03
Date