



Federation of Mountain Clubs of BC

Accessing the backcountry one step at a time

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Tori Meeks
Land Officer, Mountain Resorts Branch
Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations
510 - 175 2nd Ave, Kamloops, BC V2C 5W1

Re: Singing Pass access

Dear Madame,

The Federation of Mountain Clubs of BC (FMCBC) promotes self-propelled activities, such as hiking, mountaineering, trail running and backcountry skiing through leadership, advocacy and education. We are a federation of 34 outdoor clubs with a membership of over 5000 people from across the province. By working with outdoor recreation organizations, industry and government agencies, the FMCBC works to protect and maintain access for quality non-motorized recreation in B.C.'s mountains and wilderness.

As you are aware we are actively working to re-establish vehicle access to a Singing Pass Trailhead which is close to the IPP intake and the old trailhead. Further to the July 22, 2015 site visit and discussions regarding access we have prepared a summary of our position which is attached.

We look forward to discussing our position further with you. Please contact either of us if you have any questions or require clarification of any items.

Kindest Regards,

Bryce Leigh
Director Federation of Mountain Clubs of B.C.
& ACC Whistler rep for the FMCBC Recreation & Conservation Committee

Rupert Merer
ACC Whistler rep for the FMCBC Recreation & Conservation Committee

Vehicle access to higher trailhead for Singing Pass

Introduction

The Federation of Mountain clubs of BC ("FMCBC") represents 34 hiking clubs in B.C with 5000 members. Many of our members are located in southwestern B.C. and frequent the Sea to Sky area regularly for backcountry self-propelled recreation.

This memo will address the need for better public hiking access to the Fitzsimmons Valley, Singing Pass and Russet Lake. At present the lower Fitzsimmons valley is entirely closed by Whistler Blackcomb ("WB") and Whistler Sports Legacies ("WSL") tenures. Access to the spectacular mountains of the Spearhead range and to Blackcomb Glacier Provincial Park is now controlled by WB and WSL. The old mining road on the Whistler side of the valley, used by hikers for many years to drive to a trailhead 5 km above Whistler, was blocked by the Fitzsimmons slide and WB subsequently gated it and built part of the mountain bike park over it. As a result the hiking distance to Singing Pass from Whistler increased from about 7 km to 11.5 km and the trail to the Park boundary deteriorated badly. It is now in appalling condition, and although it is shown as a 'green' trail on most maps it contains some quite difficult and dangerous scrambling. During run-off it represents a serious hazard. Whistler, which markets itself as a mountain resort, has lost the only alpine access trail which starts in the village and is suitable for the average hiker.

Singing Pass and Russet Lake are accessible via the Whistler village gondola, but only during the limited hours that it operates. This means that hikers cannot start hiking until 10.30 AM and must be back at the gondola by 5 PM, (8PM at summer weekends). The cost of the gondola is significant for a family or group. It doesn't operate during most of October. Returning from Singing Pass to the Gondola involves over 500 m of climbing, so this options isn't attractive for returning hikers.

The FMCBC would like to establish a trailhead at the IPP intake in the Fitzsimmons valley, close to the old trailhead, which became inaccessible after the Fitzsimmons slide. Vehicle access to this trailhead was recommended in BC Parks recent report "Garibaldi Park, Management plan amendment for the Spearhead area". The only feasible vehicle access to the valley is by the Sliding centre road, which was built for the 2010 Olympics with public funds, and about 350 metres of WB's mountain access road. The higher trailhead would reduce the hiking distance to Russet Lake from 15 km to about 10 km, reduce the vertical climb to Singing Pass by about 30% and improve access to the Northern part of Garibaldi Park and the Fitzsimmons range.

Hiking is an important and growing part of the economy in the Sea to Sky corridor. There has been a huge increase in public use of Joffre Lakes Provincial Park as a result of its new trail. At weekends the main and overspill parking lots are often full, with cars parked for up to a km along the highway. The improved road access to the Brandywine Meadows trail has resulted in far more use. The parking lot at the Rubble Creek Garibaldi Lake trail often overflows. The Cheakamus Lake trail is heavily used and the new trail up the Squamish Chieftain sees up to 2500 hikers on weekend days. In contrast, the Singing Pass Trail is too long and rough and consequently little used. During the week there is almost no foot traffic and even at a long weekend few hikers use the trail. Few people hike beyond Russet Lake because they know that they will have a 15 km hike back from the Lake to Whistler.

Negotiations with WB and WSL for access to the Fitzsimmons valley

The FMCBC is trying to negotiate with WB and WSL for vehicle access to the higher trailhead in the Fitzsimmons valley. BC Parks, Innergex and Recreation & trails BC have joined the discussions which have been arranged by the Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations (Mountain Resorts Branch). WB and WSL have given a

number of reasons why the public should not have vehicle access to this trailhead. Most of these reasons relate to the physical features of the access road, its safety and the security of their assets, but WB and WSL also state that the exclusive tenure given to them by the BC Government allows them to restrict public access. This memo will refute the physical, safety and security reasons put forward by WB/WL and separately discuss the issue of the Crown land tenures.

Physical, safety and security

The reasons given by WB/WL for denying public vehicle access to the IPP intake, and FMCBC's comments, are shown in the table below;

WB/WSL reason for restriction of public access	FMCBC comments
Sliding centre road ("SCR") is very steep with many hairpin bends.	SLR has a gradient of 8% over most of its length with one section of 10%. It has 8 hairpin bends with radius about 20 metres. The total vertical is only about 140 m. In comparison Highway #99 (Duffey Lake Rd) has gradients of 13% and several sharper bends. It rises 700 m in 7 km, at an average grade of 10%. Speed control during descent requires some skill. Many popular tourist roads in the US and Europe have much higher grades, higher total elevation drop and sharper corners. For example the Mt Evans tourist road in Colorado has 7 bends with radius of about 10 m, many others of below 20 m radius, and grades of 15%.
The minutes to our July 12 meeting state that. <i>WB has tenure on the roads up to Lot 8 and from the top of the Sliding Center onward. These roads are not public roads, but resort operation/industrial roads and have not been constructed to public or municipal road standards</i>	We do not understand this item. The argument seems to be that the public should be excluded from the SCR and the road from the Sliding centre to the IPP Intake because they are resort/industrial roads. However the minutes state that the road to lots 6, 7 and 8, staff housing and other accommodation is also a resort operation/industrial road, and this road is used by thousands of people every day in winter. We also note that the road to parking lots 6, 7, and 8 has corners almost as sharp as those of the Sliding centre road, when the effect of the concrete curbs is considered. Hikers in BC have to use industrial (logging and mining) roads to access the alpine all over the province. Some popular hiking trails, including at least one in which Recreation Sites & Trails BC has invested, can only be accessed over narrow and steep logging roads requiring far more driving skill than the Sliding centre road.
Safety	The SCR is used by many organisations in addition to WB and WSL, including Ziptrek, Canadian Wilderness adventures (for ATV, Jeep and Dog sled tours), Innergex and Bear tours. CWA run ATV tours up the road where the only qualification of the driver is that he/she has a valid driving licence. Previous experience driving an ATV or on a mountain road is not required. Seat belts are not worn. These tours take children riding behind adults, arms around the driver's waist. FMCBC have observed some serious safety violations. In contrast, most members of the public who would access a higher parking lot have many years or decades of experience driving very rough mountain roads. Clearly only those who pay can use the SCR, even though it was built with public money.
Security	WSL has concerns about the security of their property, but the site is already open to pedestrians, day and night, and can easily be accessed by dirt bikes, ATVs or even a 4WD truck if someone is determined to vandalize the facilities. The same argument applies to WB's bone yard. If necessary it wouldn't be difficult for WB to gate their storage areas.
It is a busy road	FMCBC's observations suggest that the lower section of the SC road sees 30 to 40 vehicles per hour on a summer work day (total of traffic up and down), while the upper section has far less. There are frequent periods of 10 minutes or more

	with no traffic in either direction. In the morning, when hikers would use the road, there is almost no traffic. As a Government asset, the SC road in summer appears to be underutilized
WB has radio protocols on their mountain access road and vehicle safety procedures.	We can understand the need for radio and safety protocols on steep parts of the mountain access road, from where it leaves the valley to the top of Blackcomb. We have not observed such protocols on the Sliding centre road and given the nature of that road, discussed above, they don't appear necessary.

WB and WSL tenures

FMCBC accepts that WB and WSL have mandates to minimize their costs and maximize their return on investment, WB from their Shareholders and WL from the Government. Both parties need exclusive Tenure to protect their investments. But allowing public vehicle access to the IPP intake need not involve extra cost, beyond the minor investment in gates for WB's storage area, even if there would sometimes be some minor inconvenience. The public has a general right to access all crown land subject to safety restrictions imposed by the tenure holder and provided that such access doesn't materially reduce the tenure holders ability to earn a return on its investment.

WB has already benefitted significantly from changes to their tenure, formal or otherwise, several of which have disadvantaged the public.

- By closing the access road to the old trailhead on the South of the valley WB were able to build the bike park on the North side of Whistler, which has generated huge income for them. This access road is shown on WB's 1982 Master Development Agreement as a 20 m Right of Way and clause 7.2 of that agreement clearly contemplated vehicle traffic from May 1 to Nov 1.
- WB took over substantial parts of Garibaldi Park earlier in the development of both Whistler and Blackcomb ski areas. A large part of WB's income comes from operations on land which was once in the park.
- WB have also eliminated the hiking trail above Creekside which was also part of the Master Development agreement and this has allowed development of the bike park, and other roads above Creekside.
- WB also benefited from acceptance, by the public and hikers, of changes to the Garibaldi Park boundary at the summit of Flute.

With climate change WB will probably seek further concessions from BC Parks and the public.

Providing public vehicle access to the IPP trailhead would be consistent with past cooperation between the public and WB and set the tone for any future cooperation which may be required. This concession will not negatively impact WB or WSL's corporate results, although it may occasionally provide some minor inconvenience.

Summary and future action

At present access to Russet Lake, Singing Pass, the Spearhead range and Blackcomb Glacier Provincial Park is controlled by WB and WSL. This is an unexpected consequence of Government policy to encourage ski resort development. The only access to the Spearhead section of Garibaldi Park is through the use of WB chairs and gondolas, during the limited time that they operate, or via the old trail on the Whistler side of the valley which is now in terrible condition and is hazardous. Whistler village has no alpine trail from the village which is accessible by average hikers, although studies show that hiking is the most popular activity for visitors.

The distance from Whistler village to Russet Lake is such that while a few people make the lake an objective for a one or two day hike, almost nobody hikes beyond the Lake, knowing that they face a 15 km hike home.

The public hiking community is very frustrated with the present Singing Pass Trail situation. Measures proposed by WB, including a hiking trail on the Blackcomb side of the valley, a shuttle and slightly extended gondola operating hours are not an acceptable solution to FMCBC and the hiking community. The public already has the right to walk through the sliding centre. We should not wait for a serious accident to occur on the existing trail before resolving the issue. WB have benefitted enormously by taking over more and more parts of Garibaldi Park to the detriment of park users and hikers. Much of their revenue has come from operations on what was park land. It is not unreasonable to request that, in return, WB should provide better access to the park for hikers.

WB's CRA will soon be scheduled for renewal. We think that this issue should be resolved before the CRA is renewed.