

Jan 12, 2021

Re: Capacity Study in Oak Creek Canyon

As a long-time advocate of implementing transit as a means of traffic management and congestion reduction in Oak Creek Canyon and the greater Sedona area, I support the notion of a “capacity study” for Oak Creek Canyon in particular. While this may seem a hard subject to define initially, I think that it will make more sense in the context of an overall “corridor” or “area” planning study, as I discussed several years ago in the early stages of this group’s work.

At that time, I felt that transit would benefit from a more holistic planning approach, rather than as a narrow transportation solution/project. Obviously, there is need for infrastructure to go along with transit, such as transit stops, parking areas, informational kiosks, and pedestrian pathway/recreational trail connections, that will make it far more successful than just busses running a route would ever be. The better the design of these elements, and the better they are integrated into the existing parks, recreation areas, campgrounds, and private businesses and lodges, the better residents’ and visitors’ experiences will be.

We have been looking for solutions to the issues brought by too many cars, and increasing numbers of people. But without an overall plan, a single focus on a particular traffic solution will not achieve its full potential. Good planning starts with the articulation of an overall vision and subsequent goals, from which an interconnected group of solutions can be designed. What do we want Oak Creek Canyon to be as a place for some to live, others to visit, and yet others to pass through? What should it feel like, what should the quality of experience be for each different user group, and what are nature’s own requirements for a healthy and sustainable environment? Coming to consensus on a future vision for the Canyon will help to define the capacity that it can handle in each different area. From this, various strategies and goals can then be defined to make sure that whatever solutions and infrastructure is developed will not be in conflict with the desired vision.

There are many stakeholders and responsible jurisdictions that have been participating in these meetings so far. The City of Sedona has graciously taken the lead in looking at transit in particular for the greater Sedona area, ultimately to include Oak Creek Canyon in future phases. This effort could benefit by a different yet integrated corridor/area planning effort focused on Oak Creek Canyon. While all the stakeholders mentioned above should participate and have input, the primary managers are the USFS, Coconino County, and ADOT. Perhaps one of these agencies could take on the coordination and running of such a planning effort.

County General Plans often have additional subsets of area specific plans, like the Flagstaff Regional Plan. Oak Creek Canyon could perhaps fall under such a designation. Or perhaps the Coconino National Forest could initiate a specific area study as they did for the greater Sedona area under the former Amendment 12 several decades ago, in order to address a whole list of significant issues that were unique to the area and not covered well enough in the general plan. After enough time had passed and many of the plan goals became implemented, eventually the

Sedona area was able to be re-integrated into the whole forest plan without needing the special amendment. Perhaps the issues in Oak Creek Canyon have reached the point where it would be to the Coconino National Forest's benefit to make a similar area designation for the purposes of a special planning effort. ADOT also has a history of undertaking a major corridor planning study effort like they did for HWY. 179. No matter who would take the lead, I would hope that the other responsible agencies would contribute in both effort and funding. Perhaps NACOG could help find funding for such a process.

Without some overall planning vision, I think this group will struggle to define carrying capacity, other than as a bunch of separate single-agency issues. While many may groan at the thought of another "Plan", in reality planning is ongoing all the time, and each agency has mandated updates to their general plans at different frequencies. In the best of worlds, there would be some flexibility in these processes, so that as conditions change, resources can be re-directed to where they are needed most. It is obvious to me as a local resident of Sedona at the base of the Canyon, and a frequent recreational user, researcher, and commuter through the Canyon, that the situation is bad enough to warrant a transfer of focus and resources to Oak Creek Canyon from all the relevant agencies at this time.

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