

# Upper Mill Creek Canyon Road Improvements

## 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, passing Elbow Fork, and ending at the Upper Big Water Trailhead.

## Public Outreach and Comments Received

Salt Lake County and Millcreek published and distributed two flyers and held a press conference, on November 3, 2021, to broaden awareness of the project.

The project team hosted an open house on November 9, 2021, to present a project overview, share conceptual designs, and gather input from the public. Notice for the public open house was provided via social media, local news media, and the Salt Lake County project website. The open house had over 100 attendees and was followed by a 30-day comment period. Approximately 340 comments were received. This included comments submitted at the open house and online during the comment period.

The purpose of this document is to provide an overview of the comments received. The comments illustrated the importance of Mill Creek Canyon as a community resource, whether for its natural environment or the recreation opportunity it provides. Generally, the comments fell into one or more of the following major themes:

- Resource protection
- Bicycle and pedestrian safety
- Increased speeds
- Parking
- Design element considerations
- Shuttle system or other mass transit option
- Level of environmental review
- Fire cabin owner concerns
- Section 4(f) evaluation

The intent of the early public engagement was to hear what the public may be concerned about relating to this project and allow the project team to address those concerns through the preliminary engineering and environmental review processes, to the extent practicable. As described below in responses to the key comments, the project team will consider the 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 process.

## Design Considerations

The existing road width varies throughout the canyon and the road tends to narrow as one drives up the canyon. The project team took measurements throughout the project area and confirmed that the width of the road changes above and below Elbow Fork, as follows.

- **Winter Gate to Elbow Fork:** the roadway width varies from 18.5 to 25.5 feet, and averages approximately 22 feet.
  - **Elbow Fork to Upper Big Water Trailhead:** the roadway width varies from 11 feet at its narrowest to 23 feet, and averages approximately 17 feet.
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To balance different uses and concerns along the road, the project design team is considering different roadway widths and lane configurations as part of the preliminary design. A narrower roadway width typically results in less physical impact to the surrounding environment. However, that comes with tradeoffs for the amount of space provided for cyclists and drivers.

The primary roadway widths being considered range from 20 to 26 feet wide and include a variety of lane configurations. Widths up to 30-feet have been considered, but these result in the highest costs and impacts, and have numerous construction challenges. Examples of potential lane configurations include the following:

- A 26-foot wide road, with two 10-foot lanes, a 5-foot climbing lane for bicycles, and a 1-foot shoulder on the downhill side. This provides the maximum amount of space for cyclists and drivers, but also has higher costs and higher impacts.
- A 24-foot wide road, with two 10-foot lanes, a 3-foot climbing lane for bicycles, and a 1-foot shoulder on the downhill side. This maintains a climbing lane for cyclists, albeit narrower, and has a smaller footprint.
- A 20-foot wide road, with 10-foot lanes and no shoulders. This has the smallest footprint and lowest cost, but also results in drivers and cyclists sharing space. This could be used in select locations where unique resources or physical constraints, such as adjacent hillsides, are present.

None of the examples above have been selected, and additional options are being studied during preliminary engineering. The intent is find solutions that balance the interest of various user groups and environmental impacts, while addressing the transportation needs. The environmental review process will be used to help determine the most context-sensitive design solution

## Responses to Comments

A summary of comments and responses is included in the table below.

Comment Summary, and Response
<b>Resource Protection</b>
<p><b>Comment Summary:</b> The beauty of Mill Creek Canyon and its natural and cultural resources should be protected.</p> <p><b>Response:</b> The project design team is considering concepts that include both different roadway widths and different lane configurations. As the canyon increases in elevation, it becomes narrower, so there are also different options being explored between Winter Gate to Elbow Fork and Elbow Fork to Upper Big Water Trailhead. A narrower roadway width typically results in less physical impact to the surrounding environment. However, each project element can create both positive and negative impacts. For example</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Retaining walls reduce the physical footprint of the project, but have a high cost and result in visual impacts.</li> <li>• Drainage ditches and curbs create a wider road, but reduce erosion by directing water to specific locations.</li> </ul> <p>The goal of the project is to develop a solution that strikes a balance between improving access and safety while minimizing environmental impacts. More information on these concepts will be presented at the next public open house.</p>
<b>Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety</b>
<p><b>Comment Summary:</b> Bicycle and pedestrian safety is important because of the number of people walking or riding across or along Mill Creek Canyon road.</p> <p><b>Response:</b> As stated above, the project design team is analyzing multiple concepts that include both different roadway widths and lane configurations. A wider roadway allows more space for driver and cyclists, however it can also result in greater environmental impacts. Multiple concepts are being developed to find a balance between drivers and cyclists and environmental impacts. Other safety considerations beyond roadway width and bicycle lanes include eliminating informal parking areas and installing signing and striping.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elimination of informal roadside parking areas (described below) will keep vehicles from parking on the shoulder. These cars often encroach into the road, making it even narrower, and can create unsafe conditions for cyclists.</li> </ul>

- Crosswalks could be striped, flashing signs could be installed in high traffic areas, and informational and warning signs could be placed in areas where drivers, pedestrians, and cyclist may be present, such as trailheads and sharp curves with limited sight distance.

Additional information on these concepts and potential impacts will be presented at the next public open house.

**Parking**

**Comment Summary:** A change in parking management is required to improve safety and reduce impacts to natural resources without increasing the overall parking capacity in the Canyon.

**Response:** The project team is considering options to eliminate existing informal roadside parking areas and generally maintain the current overall parking capacity by increasing parking capacity at existing trail heads.

Increasing parking capacity 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. Informal roadside parking presents a safety hazard to pedestrians, bicyclists, and vehicles in the travel lanes. Additionally, informal roadside parking tends to encroach on and damage vegetation, causes erosion, and typically results in other impacts to natural resources, including 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 into the road, making it even narrower, and can create unsafe conditions for cyclists.
- 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.
- 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 formal Forest Service System trails and restrooms.

More information on proposed parking changes will be presented at the next public open house.

**Section 4(f) Evaluations**

**Comment Summary:** Mill Creek Canyon, particularly the entire upper canyon (above the winter gate) should qualify as a Section 4(f) Property in accordance with the requirements set forth in the Department of Transportation Act of 1966.

FHWA-CFLHD will be reviewing the project under Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act during the environmental review process. This review consists of identifying Section 4(f) properties and resources in coordination with the official or agency with jurisdiction, which would be the USDA Forest Service for recreation-type resources and the Utah State Historic Preservation Office for historic-type resources. Once the locations and boundaries of Section 4(f) properties and resources have been determined, FHWA-CFLHD will assess use of those resources based on the proposed project design and document the findings, which may require additional agency and public coordination. The specific requirements for the Section 4(f) process have not been identified, as we are still very early in the process.

**Increased Speeds**

**Comment Summary:** Widening Mill Creek Canyon Road could lead to increased speeds.

**Response:** The project design team is analyzing multiple concept that include a narrower lane width than the 11-foot lanes shared at the public open house. There are tradeoffs however, as lanes continue to narrow there is increased potential for accidents, including head on collisions or vehicles running off the road. Drivers also anticipate a consistent lane width and by providing that the amount of weaving within the lane itself is reduced.

Mill Creek Canyon Road needs to be able allow for passage of emergency service vehicles. Per the United Fire Authority, their trucks measure 8.5 feet across the front bumper. The sideview mirrors extend an additional 6 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 efficiently through the canyon, and in the case of a fire, while canyon users may be evacuating.

The project development process is meant to find the right balance between driver safety, bicycle and pedestrian safety, and accommodate emergency service providers.

#### Level of Environmental Review

**Comment Summary:** A greater degree of environmental analysis should be completed to satisfy the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) than the proposed categorical exclusion.

**Response:** Under FHWA regulations, FHWA-CFLHD follows an environmental review process for all projects, regardless of the level of NEPA documentation or the class of action that is selected. This process can be very simple or more complex with public involvement and extensive analyses, depending on the project. For the proposed project, FHWA-CFLHD will be coordinating closely with the partner agencies throughout the process and will ensure the public is kept informed about the project at key milestones or stages in the process. In reviewing the comments received to date about the project, FHWA-CFLHD has re-evaluated the purpose and need and preliminary design features in an attempt to address public concerns about the proposed improvements. In addition, FHWA-CFLHD is conducting resource studies to better understand the environmental issues in the area, with background research and fieldwork for cultural and biological resources and other data gathering being conducted so far.

With additional information about the project being presented at the next public open house, FHWA-CFLHD anticipates considering additional public input at that time to determine the most appropriate class of action for the project.

#### Shuttle or Other Mass Transit Option

**Comment Summary:** Implement a shuttle system or other mass transit option to provide access while limiting the number of vehicles.

**Response:** Although beyond the scope of this project, a future shuttle will not be precluded by the proposed improvements. Some of the challenges and questions facing a shuttle system include the following:

- Which agency or municipality would own and operate the shuttle?
- How and who would pay for shuttle service? This include costs such as buying shuttles, building parking facilities, and paying shuttle drivers and mechanics.
- Where do shuttle users park? This parking would need to accommodate parked vehicles, shuttles, and likely restrooms. A shuttle starting at the Winter Gate would face similar challenges.

This road improvement project addresses the issues of a crumbling and narrow roadway. The project would upgrade the existing roadway, which would better support a future shuttle or transit option. In addition, parking improvements at Upper Big Water Trailhead and at the Winter Gate would be designed to facilitate future conversion to shuttle use by considering potential pick up/drop off locations and turnarounds.

#### Firs Cabin Owner Concerns

**Comment Summary:** Lease holders at the 24-cabin Firs tract expressed three primary concerns:

1. Access limitations during construction.
2. Ongoing financial obligations, such as taxes, resulting from cabin ownership and its burden while having only limited access to their cabins.
3. The importance of protecting cabins' water source during construction.

**Response:** FHWA-CFLHD 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 users of the Canyon. However, 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 access if feasible, safe, and if it doesn't delay construction activities.

During the environmental review process, FHWA-CFLHD will consider social and economic effects of the project, as well as other resource effects, such as ground water. The Forest Service can pro-rate or adjust the recreation resident special use permit fee, but does not have the jurisdiction or authority to waive or adjust county or state tax fees. FHWA-CLFHD is aware of the spring location that provides water to the cabins. Because it is located beyond the limits of construction, and on the opposite side of Mill Creek from the roadway, it is not anticipated to be affected by the project.

**Specific Design Considerations**

**Comment Summary:** Several substantive comments included recommendations relating to project design elements or alternative methodologies to address the project's purpose and need that may not have been previously considered.

**Response:** The project team is considering various design features and options to meet the project's purpose and need in light of the comments that have been provided. Some of these considerations are presented above and will be shared at the next public open house.

### Future Opportunities to Provide Input

Another public open house will be held 4 –7 P.M., May 19, 2022, at the Millcreek City Hall, 3330 S 1300 E, Millcreek, UT 84106. This public open house will include:

- A presentation and question and answer session
- Descriptions and figures of concepts
- Summary of the environmental data gathered to date
- An opportunity to speak with project team members and provide additional input

The meeting will be advertised via social media, the project website (<https://slco.org/millcreekcanyon>) and emails sent to persons who have previously provided input.

