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Gorge Commission Releases Report on Historic Buildings

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The Columbia River Gorge Commission will consider a proposal to expand the types of commercial uses allowed in the Scenic Area in buildings that are on or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (National Register) on October 11, 2005 at the Rock Creek Center in Stevenson, Washington.

Today, the Commission released the "Director's Report" for a proposal to amend the Management Plan for the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. The original proposal, submitted on behalf of the owners of the Viewpoint Inn, would have allowed private properties that were originally operated as restaurants or hotels and that were on the National Register in 1986 to reestablish those uses. As submitted, this proposal would only apply to the Viewpoint Inn, which is the only privately-owned building in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area currently on the National Register.

"Gorge Commission staff agree with the owners of the Viewpoint Inn that we need to allow a few specific commercial activities that both allow property owners to raise funds to restore their historic buildings and also promote public appreciation of those buildings," said Martha Bennett, Executive Director. "In reviewing the proposed changes, though, we have concluded that many historically significant buildings in the Gorge are at risk. Staff is recommending to the Commission that they adopt a change to the plan that would help approximately 60 buildings in the Gorge rather than just one."

As part of their review of the proposed amendment to the Management Plan, Commission staff contracted with Donovan and Associates to do an inventory of historic buildings in the Scenic Area. "The study found that there are currently 4 buildings on the National Register, and 18 that Oregon and Washington State Historic Preservation Officers have already found to be eligible. In addition, the study found 36 other buildings in the Gorge that likely are eligible for

the National Register,” said Bennett. “We have a manageable, but significant number of historic treasures.”

The Director’s report recommends that the Commission allow a few new commercial uses in historically significant buildings in the Scenic Area. Under the recommendation, owners would have to demonstrate how the new commercial activities would result in the restoration of their historic building.

“We learned a great deal from places in the Northwest that have a wealth of historic buildings. Many of the communities that have successfully saved their historic districts allow this sort of adaptive reuse,” said Bennett. “We hope this would create an incentive for people who own historically significant buildings to reinvest in their property.”

“The first purpose of the National Scenic Area Act directs the Commission to protect and enhance cultural resources,” said Bennett. “The Act also allows economic activities in the Gorge that are consistent with protecting the scenery, culture, natural resources, and recreational qualities of the Gorge.”

“The Commission has to find that three things are true before they amend the Management Plan,” said Bennett. “First, they have to find there has been a significant change in the Scenic Area. Second, they have to find that the proposed amendment is consistent with the Scenic Area Act. Third, they have to find that there isn’t a better way to achieve the same goal than amending the Plan.”

The complete Director’s Report is available on the Commission’s website at www.gorgecommission.org or by calling (509) 493-3323.

The Gorge Commission will hold a public hearing on the application to amend the Management Plan on October 11, 2005 at the Rock Creek Center in Stevenson, Washington. The Commission will take testimony on both the specific proposal submitted on behalf of the Viewpoint Inn and the modified amendment included in the Director’s Report. The specific time for the hearing will be posted on the Commission’s website by September 30, 2005. (www.gorgecommission.org).

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