



Feedback: What to do about it? What to do with it? A quick primer

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You're about to leap into the process of reading through and sorting community feedback on your proposal. At this stage in your process it's easy to get upset, or take things personally, or even feel overwhelmed. After all, you've spent a lot of time over the last several months in discussion, on field trips, and on your own, thinking through your draft proposal and the supporting rationales, and now people are asking you to consider more or telling you they think you got it wrong.

Before we jump into a little background on processes we might use for sorting comments, it is important to take a step back and remember why you solicited feedback in the first place.

The fundamental reason to solicit feedback, from my perspective, is always to gain input that will improve the quality of your proposal. It is a chance to have a set of fresh eyes look over your work and help you improve it. It is an opportunity for you to check your facts, review your rationales, and make sure they lead to a quality decision. Soliciting feedback also:

- **Helps people feel heard.**
- **Helps build the credibility of your proposal.**
- **Helps you identify errors or omissions.**

It's important to stay focused on these positive outcomes from soliciting public feedback and to resist the temptation to make it personal and debate the validity of the feedback people are providing, or of the people who are providing it. Review of public feedback requires the Zen-like skill of mindfulness without attachment. You've got to read all the comments and consider them carefully, and you also have to stay focused and move on to using the input wisely.

So what do you do with all this input? Under most circumstances there are five options.

Comments can be used to:

- 1) Modify your proposal or make other small changes.**
- 2) Develop and consider new ideas not previously given serious consideration.**
- 3) Supplement, improve, or modify your rationales.**
- 4) Make factual corrections.**
- 5) Or you can explain why you are not responding to a given concern.**

Remember: A key purpose of feedback is to improve the quality of your decision. You are not going to respond to every comment. By respond, I mean act on the substance of the comment in one of the five ways described above.

To determine which comments warrant a detailed response, you will use some basic criteria. Oftentimes it's easier to figure out which comments do not warrant a detailed response.

Generally, the quality of your decision will not be improved by responding to comments that meet the following criteria. I offer paraphrased examples from real comments:

1) Statements of opinion, general comments, or position statements: Many people offer comments indicating either their support or dislike of a component of your proposal or the whole thing.

“I’ve enjoyed hiking in this area for several years.”

“Your proposal is right on track.”

“Keep areas open for snowmobiles.”

“I think cross-country skiing is more important than other winter activities.”

Unfortunately, they also often forget to tell you the all-important why—the rationale that would allow you to consider their input in the context of how you might modify or change your proposal.

2) Outside the scope of the decision: Sometimes people don’t have a clear understanding of the scope of the proposal, or they choose to comment on items that are clearly not part of the proposal.

“The Shady Rest Trailhead needs to be improved.”

“An OSV connection should be provided from Shady Rest to the Sherwin Area.”

“Implement fees for uphill rides for snowboarders.”

“A motorized corridor should be provided in case Snowcreek 8 decides to rent snowmobiles in the future.”

Comments are outside the scope when they address a different geographic area than the study area, propose changes to the proposal that may already be decided by law or regulations, or propose changes in response to a speculative future condition.

3) Already addressed by law, regulation, or policy: People may suggest changes to your proposal that are outside your ability to recommend, much less implement. This criteria may not apply all that often to your proposal and is similar to the idea of outside-the-scope comments.

“More motorized events should be held at the motocross racetrack.”

“Require dog owners to pick up after their pets.”

Both the number of motorized events at the motocross racetrack and a requirement for disposal of dog waste are decisions that have already been made and are addressed by existing law, regulations, or policy.

4) Raise an issue better addressed through another decision process: Sometime people bring up concerns that are better addressed at a different scale or in a different process.

“Provide a site-specific design plan for the gravel pit trailhead.”

“You should seriously consider the area for future gondolas or ski lifts.”

Since the SWG did not address site-specific design, it would likely not be appropriate to decide to do so at this point. Regardless, it is clear that site-specific design will be considered during the next phase.



It is important to note that these criteria are not mutually exclusive. The objective of this kind of process is not to figure out which criteria are the best; a comment may meet several. The objective is to separate those comments that do warrant a detailed response from those that do not warrant a detailed response.

Remember, the objective is to identify those comments that will help improve the quality of the decision!

Here is an easier way to get your head around these criteria, and maybe an easier way to sort the comments. When your reading comments, ask the questions: Can we do something about it? Did we do something about it? Should we do something about it? For right now just focus on the first two; the last question helps get at the process we'll engage in on October 13.

Can we do something to address the concern?

Is it within scope?

Is it within our authority?

Is this the right process within which to consider it?

Did we do something to address the concern?

Did we consider it and address it in our rationale?

Should we do something to address the concern?

Would it improve the decision?

Does it better address the issues we were resolving?

Does it identify a new opportunity or constraint?

Here are some examples:

“You should seriously consider the area for future gondolas or ski lifts.”

Is this something SWG can do? Probably not; it's outside the scope, it exceeds SWG's charter for looking at trails, and this may not be the right process for considering ski lifts.

“Provide access corridors for snowmobiles with restrictions on speed.”

Can SWG consider this idea? Probably yes; it's within the scope of the work SWG is doing and it's the right process for considering this kind of idea.

Did SWG consider this idea already? I remember SWG looked at corridors and talked about noise and speed restrictions and concluded we were more concerned about an inability to enforce these kinds of regulations.

“Consider restrictions on time and days of use for snowmobiles to allow continued OSV use while minimizing impacts.”



Can SWG consider this idea? Probably yes; it's within the scope of the work SWG is doing and it's the right process for considering this kind of idea.

Did SWG consider this idea already? I remember SWG looked at corridors and talked about noise and speed restrictions, but I don't recall SWG discussing restrictions on days of use as a means for reducing impacts.

Should SWG consider this idea? Well, we had concerns about enforcement; restrictions on days of use might be more enforceable. Even if we decide not to propose restrictions on days of use for snowmobiles, it is worth considering and will improve the quality of whatever decision we make.

Task for October 8, 2009

Your task for Thursday is to review the public feedback and sort it into those comments that warrant a detailed response, the ones that will be carried forward to the full SWG on October 13.

There are many comments that ask questions, request clarification, or point out an error or omission. In general we will not be spending a lot of time on these comments. Don't worry, they won't be lost, but for right now we need to focus on those comments that could result in a change to the SWG proposal.

Before the meeting, please:

- 1. Read or at least skim through all the comments in the table provided by MLTPA. Please do not judge or try to sort comments the first time you read them. Do start to think about how you might organize them.**
- 2. Take a look at the example I am providing of how I sorted comments related to snowmobiles. Our end result on Thursday will look something like this, but for the full range of topics.**
- 3. Once you have read through the comments and taken a look at the example I am providing, take another look at the table provided by MLTPA and jot down what you think the eight or nine key issues are that the SWG will need to respond to on the 13th.**

