

15 October 2011

Regional Director Pacific West Region

National Park Service

111 Jackson Street, Suite 700

Oakland, California 94607

Attention: Concession Program Manager

To whom it may Concern:

I am writing regarding the selection of the Volcano House concessionaire, providing a perspective from a forty-year Volcano community neighbor of Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. My own experiences with the Volcano House (VH) mirror the impressions that my father shared with me of his memorable visits to the VH starting in 1940 or so. In those years the National Park management had a low profile, and the image of the National Park (NP) was cast as much by the VH as by the extraordinary landscape. Those were the years of legendary hospitality under its long-time manager George Lycurgis. When I arrived in Volcano years later, the VH still was an hospitable and effective liaison between the NP and the neighboring communities, and I enjoyed countless trips to the dining room and lounge with friends and family. There was a vibrant mixing of locals, NPS staff and visitors, and the periodic entertainment drew large crowds. The NP and VH shared a positive image with all.

The selection of the last concessionaire led to the end of that image-- a poor choice for all concerned. The new operation quickly alienated local interaction and support, and the VH became isolated from the communities and park staff. Changes in operations and the physical nature of the VH reflected a primary goal of skimming one-time visitors in a cheapened atmosphere to maximize profits. Despite my coming into the park regularly to work as a field biologist for another federal agency, there was no appeal for me at all to return for visits to the VH, and I was not alone in this feeling. This diminished image remains, and I feel that it is incumbent upon the proper selection of the right concessionaire to repair and replace both the image and the interactive nature of Hawaii Volcanoes National Park with its neighboring communities. While current NPS programs have made significant progress, there is still a large need that can be filled by the selection and operations of the right concessionaire.

I strongly feel that the right concessionaire is present now in the application by The Volcano Project (TVP). During the three or more years that this project has taken shape and entered the competition, Anne Lee and David Donald have become well known members of the community. They have rekindled a broad interest in the future of the VH and its relations to its neighborhood and to the broader island community. Always asking for input on how the VH could do a better job, they have tried as best as they can to incorporate many contributed ideas into the constraints of the RFP and to commit to pursuing others if they gain the concession. As Anne Lee and David Donald have interacted with the local community and partners outside, the depth and detail of TVP have grown. This concept has developed in a manner that addressed the applicants' broad and growing vision for the role of the concessionaire in the activities of this special NP, and its potential role as a prominent fixture in both the NP and in the local and larger communities around it.

A significant aspect of TVP is that it is to be run as a 501(c)3 non-profit and as a training center for culinary and hospitality skills, drawing upon international talent and local personnel and resources. TVP incorporation of expanded design, goals and outreach has far exceeded any prior operational concept of the concession at the VH. Previously, the concession has operated just to make money for the contract-holder, a rather limited economic interaction for such a prominent feature of the park. With a non-profit model, more resources will be available for innovation and other

aspects of operation and community service. Given the public ownership of the NP land and taxpayer support of the NPS operations, it seems most appropriate for the concession to be not-for-profit as well.

The new vision will provide a much broader scope and far greater return for Hawaii Volcanoes National Park and for our state in general. Sourcing locally for materials and personnel by the TVP will help the local economy (as well as the image of Hawaii Volcanoes National Park). As importantly, training Hawaii people to fill the range of employment needs of the VH, and Hawaii's visitor industry in general, will benefit far beyond the operations of the concession. Such training of local talent will help to offset the industry practice to rely too much on offshore personnel for positions ranging from menial to management. Such a quality training and placement operation has the potential to progressively grow the role of Hawaii residents in their state's primary industry. Also important to residents of Hawaii is the idea that revenues from TVP would be fed back into the local economy, rather than be sent offshore.

Presently, visitation to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park is dominated by drive-through buses and rental cars, and, given the paucity of lodging, food and interpretation opportunities, the visitor experience with Hawaii Volcanoes National Park has become rather superficial, and interaction with the park landscape is nil for most visitors, limited mostly to displays and bus tour commentaries. Visitors without a car or on a short budget are all but left out. Those wanting a deeper interaction on trails within the natural landscape are often limited to the centrally located offerings. Those wanting to experience longer trails and overnight durations discover that rental cars are essential, and those lacking same tend to be left out or have to face challenging logistics. This is particularly disappointing, as Hawaii Volcanoes National Park has the best network of trails on the island, and most of the accessible overnight cabins. Internal shuttles and connections with other means of transport for visitors is very much needed. TVP has expressed an honest interest in expanding or facilitating visitor support in access logistics and lodging. Such is a major means to expand exposure to the NP and its natural resources to a wider audience. While Hawaii Volcanoes National Park no longer has the staff to provide the interactive interpretation with visitors and adequate maintenance of trails and cabins that it once had, the proper concessionaire could also provide or coordinate assistance and lobby for increased NPS staffing specific to these needs. TVP has expressed the desire to assist, and also to interact with Kilauea Military Camp with their considerable facilities that are located not far from the Volcano House.

I do hope that you will favorably consider the submission from The Volcano Project. The applicants' concept has earned broad community and wider Hawaii support.

Thank you for your consideration of my comments,



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