

# Kaaterskill Clove Visitor Use Management Project

## Synthesis of March 29, 2023 Virtual Stakeholder Conversations

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### Background

On March 7, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) announced the initiation of a visitor use management (VUM) planning process within the Kaaterskill Clove area of the Catskill Park. The VUM planning process will focus on the experiential, social, and public safety elements of visitor use in this important recreation area. As public outreach and stakeholder engagement is critical to the success of this project, DEC asked the Otak consultant team<sup>1</sup> to convene this meeting of key stakeholders to:

1. Provide foundational information about the Kaaterskill Clove visitor use management project to stakeholders who have long histories with the appreciation and management of these public lands.
2. Begin learning stakeholder perspectives about the project to help focus data collection and public engagement.
3. Solicit thoughts about the project's public involvement plan.

The first part of the meeting began at 6:30 pm with a welcome and the self-introduction of participants ([Attachment 1](#) contains a table of attendees), followed by a project overview provided by DEC and Otak. The second part of the meeting was conducted in a manner similar to a stakeholder group interview, where participants were asked open-ended questions and invited to share their perspectives. DEC representatives were excused prior to beginning the stakeholder conversations.

### Part 1: Project Overview

Tony Luisi, DEC Regional Director, provided brief opening remarks. McCrea Burnham, DEC, provided an overview of the project including its background, purpose, other data collection efforts, an overview of the study area and project team, and timeline of the project. Steve Lawson (Otak) provide a brief overview of the VUM framework. The complete meeting slide deck may be viewed through this link: [Kaaterskill Clove Presentation Slides](#). Stakeholders had no clarifying questions following these presentations. One participant stated that the VUM process is overdue, and his organization is eager to begin this work. As there were no further questions, Susan Hayman, third-party neutral facilitator from the Otak team, excused DEC staff and continued the meeting.

### Part 2: Synthesis of Stakeholder Perspectives

Susan led a Mural Board activity with a series of questions followed by a conversation where stakeholders were invited to discuss their feedback and responses. [Attachment 2](#) contains screen shots of the Mural Boards, the contents of which are synthesized below.

#### *Organizational Interests in VUM in the Project Area*

Prior to the meeting, stakeholders were asked to briefly describe their organization's interests in VUM in the Kaaterskill Clove Project Area. Identified interests included:

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<sup>1</sup> The Otak team will conduct the VUM analysis, and support public outreach and stakeholder engagement.

- **Local Government:** Serving as representatives of residents and visitors and fulfilling their roles and responsibilities as elected officials; improving road and recreation infrastructure.
- **Safety:** Enforcing laws related to resident and visitor health and safety, including traffic and parking management, and serving as first responders for area incidents.
- **Collaboration:** Enhancing and supporting collaborative problem-solving, funding, implementation, monitoring, and adaptive management; implementing outcomes of the Catskill Strategic Advisory Group (CAG) process.
- **Economic Benefits:** Safeguarding the economic interests of local communities, and balancing resource protections with potential economic benefits of tourism and related development.
- **Resource Protection:** Protecting natural/environmental resources from overuse through proper planning and management, and coordinating stewardship efforts to mitigate threats and impacts from overuse.
- **Recreation/Tourism:** Enhancing, encouraging, and managing visitor use at key area recreational events and facilities; providing a gateway for visitor use, and moving visitors throughout the project area; providing access to all types of recreationists from all kinds of areas; and providing regional information and education on recreation best practices and preparedness.
- **Interpretive Services:** Protecting, maintaining, and interpreting the distinctive qualities and rural character of the area, including the scenic byway and Mountaintop’s rich heritage.

*Greatest Concerns about the VUM Process*

- **Time to Implementation/Process Fatigue:** While stakeholders acknowledged the good intentions of DEC and the positive actions that have been implemented to date, they also see a bureaucracy that often prevents goals from being achieved in a reasonable amount of time. Some fear that “process perfection will be the enemy of progress,” and are anxious to begin implementation of actions they believe are non-controversial and “low hanging fruit.” Some feel this process will add recommendations to an already lengthy list of recommendations from the Catskill Strategic Advisory Group (CAG) Report.
- **Ability to Implement:** Some stakeholders aren’t confident DEC will be able to create and implement strategic, long-term plans consistent with the outcomes of the VUM process. A lack of funding and staffing to support implementation contributes to this concern. Stakeholders seek commitment from DEC that actions decided upon will ultimately be implemented.
- **Inclusivity:** Stakeholders and partners have invested significant time, effort, and resources towards the protection and use of this area, and want assurance that their involvement will be valued and included in this process. Others want to be sure the general public is fully engaged in this process, reflecting the diversity of people that value and visit this area.
- **Outcomes of the VUM Process:** Stakeholders emphasized the importance of conducting a thorough, robust VUM analysis, rather than a “checklist” exercise. Some stakeholders are keenly interested in infrastructure and other physical improvements, and are unclear whether this VUM process will address those kinds of needs. Stakeholders are concerned there may be a lack of ability to reach a consensus on desired condition and visitor capacity.
- **Long-term Monitoring/Unintended Consequences:** Stakeholders stressed the importance of DEC’s commitment to long-term monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation as needed. They

also shared concerns that management changes in some areas of the Clove may affect other areas, and it will be important to be adaptable to new information.

#### *Greatest Needs for VUM in the Kaaterskill Clove Project Area*

- **Reducing Impacts to Communities:** Stakeholders expressed frustration about the persistent impacts on local communities from roadside parking, traffic congestion, pressures on first responders, and general law enforcement demands. High visitation, coupled with inadequate infrastructure and unprepared visitors, were cited as contributing factors.
- **Enhancing Visitor Experience:** Enhancing visitor experience was cited as a critical need to support economic development and local businesses. Stakeholders suggested consideration of multi-cultural and multi-lingual informational needs, accessible public transportation, accessible visitor information, and a prioritization for safety were identified as needs for enhancing visitor experience.
- **Expanding Use of Other Recreational Opportunities in Kaaterskill Clove:** To help distribute crowds and reduce parking pressure in highly visited areas, stakeholders suggested enhancing visitor experiences throughout the project area to encourage visitation in areas other than the main swimming holes in Kaaterskill Clove. Others cautioned about the potential to impact other areas through such “redistribution” of use.
- **Rightsizing Based on Visitor Preferences –** Some stakeholders discussed the need to determine the appropriate number of visitors at each location to help identify infrastructure and transportation system gaps, and reduce resource impacts. Other stakeholders expressed the importance of not limiting economic development opportunities by overregulating visitor use.
- **A Holistic Approach:** Stakeholders seek creating consensus around management goals for long-term management success through the integration of stakeholders and partners. An action plan and framework with tactics for effective management, a timeline, and agreed-upon expectations would support this.
- **Local Resources:** Stakeholders emphasized that more human resources and funding is needed to implement desired outcomes. Separately, the local economy needs to experience economic benefits as an outcome of the VUM process, including benefits from increased local tourism.

#### *Greatest Opportunities for VUM in the Kaaterskill Clove Project Area*

- **Adaptive Management:** The VUM process has the potential to fast-track particular action items that do not involve research, development of indicators and thresholds, or that require tough decisions. Stakeholders strongly believe these can be implemented before the end of the process, utilizing an adaptive management approach where monitoring and adjustments can be made as needed, rather than waiting years for the perfect solution to emerge.
- **Balancing Supply and Demand:** VUM can be an opportunity to preserve ecological integrity and area resources while finding a proper level of visitor use. Focusing on visitor experiences and educating on best recreation practices and preparedness is a large part of the process.
- **Utilize Support and Partnerships to Address Complex Issues:** Passionate partners described their continued commitment to making the Catskills a special place. They believe the VUM process could help identify potential partnerships with other agencies and organizations and

improve communication between the state and local governments to identify actions best suited to solve complex visitor use issues.

- **Create a Management Framework:** VUM has the opportunity to create a management tactic or framework for what nearby towns can do about visitors, including laying out expectations for visitors. A framework can adapt a “whole park management” technique which was an idea identified in the CAG report.
- **Improve the Transportation Network:** Stakeholders suggested a greater number of trails could be linked with a shuttle system to disperse visitors and allow people to move between forest locations/towns. Connector trails would also allow more options for people to move through the project area.
- **Encourage and Educate New Visitors:** Visitors may be experiencing the area for their first time. This is an opportunity to provide them with new information and resources, encourage visitation from a greater diversity of demographics, and provide educational opportunities for an enhanced (and safer) recreation experience.

#### *Preferences for Organizational Involvement in the VUM Process*

- **Needs to be met:**
  - Clear understanding of the purpose of their engagement
  - Who is making decisions and how the decisions will be tracked
  - What information is needed by DEC
  - How the VUM process will translate into action from DEC
  - Frequent communication directly from DEC of what is being studied
  - Opportunity to make recommendations for the VUM process outcomes
- **Involvement by:**
  - Supporting **public outreach** efforts
  - Helping secure process and project/implementation **funding**
  - Hosting and attending **meetings**, providing forums, and other resources
  - Providing **early and often feedback** on products and processes

#### *Measuring/Evaluating Success of Public Participation in the VUM Process*

The public participation process will be successful if it:

- **Engages** the thousands of people visiting the Kaaterskill Clove (beyond the stakeholders present tonight who are already involved)
- Enables visitors to see what they came to see and have a **positive experience**.
- Incorporates **pre-existing recommendations**.
- Creates **greater public engagement** with a **diverse range** of visitors and communities.
- **Measurably and visibly** improves conditions in the Clove
- Reduces the **visitor issues/conflicts** communities must respond to
- Improves **traffic management**
- Improves **visitor education** and reduced need for visitor redirection
- Strengthens public and private **partnerships**.

### *Best Ways to Provide and Receive Information in the VUM Process*

- Provide input and feedback to DEC through:
  - Verbally in meetings
  - Written input and feedback
  - Surveys
  - Email
  - Willing to communicate progress to the public through various channels
- Receive project information through:
  - Meetings
  - Website
  - Email
  - Focused, online portal for resources
  - Direct, frequent communication to local towns and village officials about the issues and what's being studied, to inform recommendations as they are being developed

### *Other Interests to Contact*

Additional interests suggested for stakeholder outreach include:

- Tannersville and Palenville Business Owners
- Twilight Park
- Assemblymember Tague
- Senator Hinchey
- Tourism officials at ESD who participated in the CAG
- Catskill Park Advisory Group (Catskill Center Chairs)
- Leaders from where visitors come from (similar to earlier efforts at Peekamoose Blue Hole)
- Thruway Authority (e.g., messaging along the thruway at the Saugerties exit)

### *Next Steps/Action Items*

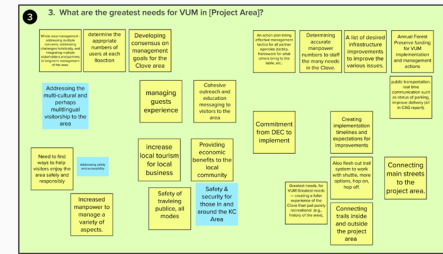
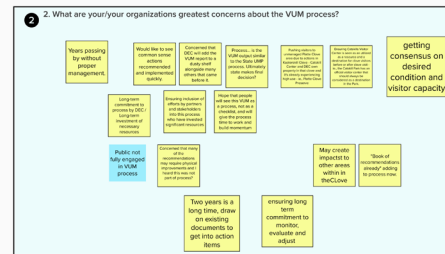
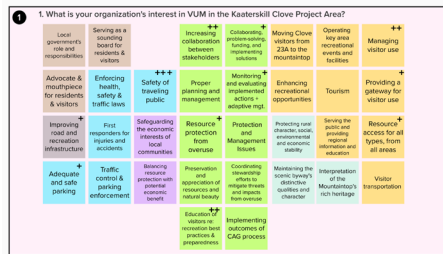
The facilitation team will complete additional stakeholder interviews before finalizing the project's public participation plan. Participants in today's meeting will be contacted as future engagement opportunities emerge, including an anticipated public meeting in May. Susan invited participants to contact her with any questions about the public process, or to provide additional feedback. A summary of tonight's meeting will be prepared and distributed soon. Susan thanked everyone for attending and participating, and adjourned the group at around 8:00 p.m.

## Attachment 1—Participants

<b>Stakeholders</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
Adrienne Larys	Mountain Top Historical Society
Ava Goodale	Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies
Cathy Pedler	Adirondack Mountain Club
David Kukle	Mountain Cloves Scenic Byway
Greg Wichser	New York State Department of Transportation
Jeff Senterman	Catskill Center
Peter Senterman	Community Member
Michelle Yost	Greene County Soil & Water Conservation District
Myra Romano	New York/New Jersey Trail Conference
Patrick Barnes	New York State Department of Transportation
Robert (Bob) Haines	Town of Hunter Police Department
Russ Colton	Hunter Mountain Ski Bowl
Ryan Chadwick	Kaaterskill Trolley
Sean Mahoney	Town of Hunter
Sergeant Ray Feml	Greene County Sheriff's Office
Taylor Jaffe	Catskill Mountainkeeper
Warren Hart	Greene County Tourism
<b>Supporting Staff</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
Tony Luisi	New York Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)
McCrea Burnham	New York Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)
Josh Clague	New York Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)
Steve Lawson	Otak
Abbie Larkin	Otak
Susan Hayman	Ross Strategic Facilitation Team
Casey Hart	Ross Strategic Facilitation Team

## Attachment 2—Mural Board Screen Shots (Zoom in to view)

### Part A: Project Perspectives



## Part B: Public Participation Opportunities

