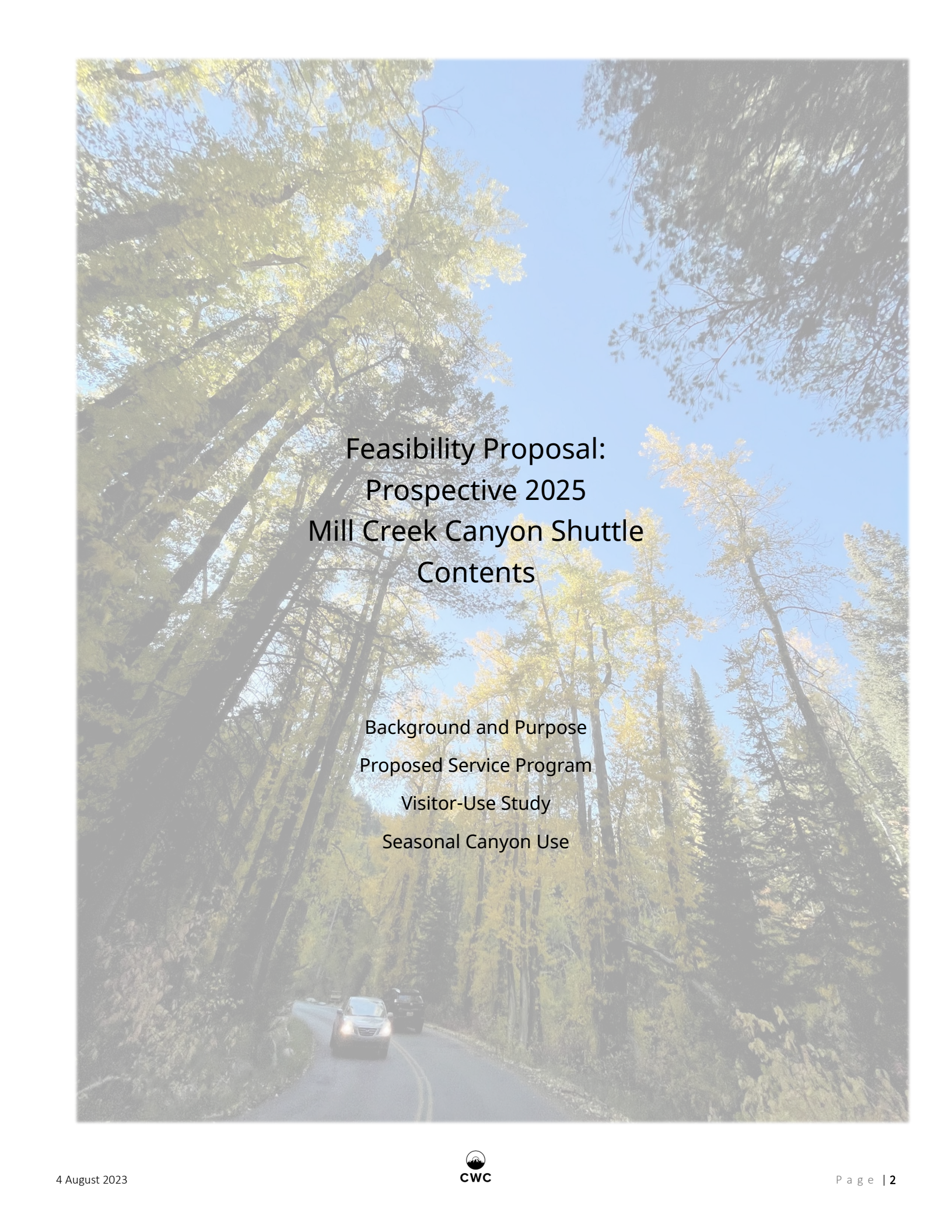


Feasibility Proposal: Prospective 2025 Mill Creek Canyon Shuttle

Central Wasatch Commission
Summer 2023



Prepared for the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest



Feasibility Proposal: Prospective 2025 Mill Creek Canyon Shuttle Contents

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Background, Purpose, and Timeline

A Shuttle service has long been considered for Mill Creek Canyon, most notably in Salt Lake County's 2012 Regional Transportation Plan, and the associated 2012 Fehr and Peers Mill Creek Canyon Shuttle Feasibility Study, and in the 2015 Mountain Accord Charter, which identified a Mill Creek Canyon Shuttle as an essential component for the reduction of canyon traffic congestion, the mitigation of parking issues, and of user-conflict within the canyon. For the purposes of watershed and resource protection, the Forest Plan contains a Desired Future Condition to maintain parking capacity in the Canyon at year-2000 levels, which a Mill Creek Shuttle service would help achieve. The Shuttle Service would also serve to protect a quality user experience in Mill Creek Canyon with the expressed goal of also preserving canyon vegetation and wildlife through a reduction of canyon vehicular presence.

As the Federal Highways Administration (FHWA) Upper Mill Creek Canyon Federal Lands Access Program (FLAP) Project is slated to begin construction in the upper portion of Mill Creek Canyon in Summer 2025, the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest is prospecting a shuttle program to service the lower portion of Mill Creek Canyon while construction closes off access to the upper portion of the canyon. District Ranger Hotze approached the Central Wasatch Commission to research and develop a proposal to assess the current feasibility of a shuttle program that would begin service Summer 2025, and would move through four service phases, based around the phases of the FLAP construction.

Research and Work Completed by Central Wasatch Commission Staff

There are 400 parking spaces available in the upper portion of Mill Creek Canyon (past the winter gate) that would become unavailable when FLAP construction begins. Accordingly, staff, in consultation with District Ranger Hotze determined that a shuttle program would then be tasked with compensating for the lost access to the Upper Canyon – shuttling 400 people per day throughout the lower portion of the canyon.

To shuttle 400 people per day, it is estimated that 10 shuttle vans would be needed. A rough estimated capital cost for 10 shuttle vans totals out at \$1,000,000, with an additional \$1,000,000 in maintenance and operational costs. Accordingly, the cost of operating a shuttle program would be \$2,000,000 the first year, and \$1,000,000 in following years without the initial capital costs. These estimates are based on conversations CWC had with shuttle company operators to research the feasibility of a shuttle program in Mill Creek Canyon.

Based on the annual operational cost of a shuttle program of this size, if the shuttle ran every day of the year, operational costs could be recouped with a \$7 shuttle fare fee. If a shuttle program of this size ran only on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, year-round, operational costs would be recouped with a \$25 fare fee.

Staff also researched potential parking and staging areas for a prospective Mill Creek canyon shuttle program. For Phase 1 of the FLAP Grant, when construction will close off access to the upper portion of the canyon, a shuttle program would need to service 400 people per day, to make up for the 400 parking stalls that will be inaccessible in the upper canyon due to construction. Staff investigated potential parking and shuttle staging areas at the Olympus Cove Commercial Mall, and the UTA Park and Ride lot at 3900 south. Neither of those options are feasible as there is no capacity in either location to stage a program of this size.

There is an empty dirt lot located near 3900 South and Wasatch Boulevard for sale. In speaking with the owner of that lot, the projected sale price for that lot is between 8 and ten million dollars. If the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest decides to pursue a shuttle program for Mill Creek Canyon, the Central Wasatch Commission could potentially work with the new owner of that lot to plan a staging area in a portion of that lot.

Proposed Service

Phase 1 – Under the current Upper Mill Creek Canyon FLAP proposal, the road above the Winter Gate will be closed during construction. Construction is anticipated from spring of 2025 through fall of 2026.

During Phase I, stops would include:

- Rattlesnake Gulch
- Boy Scouts of America
- Church Fork
- Upper Box Elder
- Porter Fork
- Maple Grove/Winter Gate (construction will begin at the winter gate)

Phase 2 – The road throughout the entire Canyon is anticipated to be open after the end of construction in 2026. This would trigger a full canyon shuttle service.

Stops would include:

- Rattlesnake Gulch
- Boy Scouts of America
- Church Fork
- Upper Box Elder
- Porter Fork
- Maple Grove/Winter Gate

- Maple Cove
- Evergreen
- Elbow Fork
- Fir Creek
- Clover Springs
- Alexander Basin
- Big Water

Phase 3 – Improvements in the lower part of the Canyon could potentially start as early as 2029 and could take two to three construction seasons to complete. Although contingencies will have to be made for private businesses within the Canyon, it is anticipated that the road below the Winter Gate will be closed. The potential of limited/ periodic shuttle service in the Canyon during this time would need to be discussed with the project’s lead agency and construction contractor when the project is authorized.

Phase 4 – The road throughout the entire Canyon is anticipated to be open at the completion of construction in the lower part of the Canyon. Phase 4 would be when the entire canyon is serviced by a shuttle bus.

Visitor-Use Study

Shuttle use on NFS lands will require identification of potential resource concerns and the development of design criteria and best management practices to mitigate anticipated impacts.

A shuttle program in Mill Creek Canyon would also require the development of a model of visitation based on temporal and spatial distribution projections of shuttle ridership. The model should address anticipated recreational use at proposed shuttle stops as well as existing trailheads and facilities where shuttle service will not be provided. Data on infrastructure requirements at proposed shuttle stops, including but not limited to restroom capacity, trailhead resource impacts, trail network impacts, and quality of user experience is necessary, and can be incorporated into future addenda of the Visitor-Use Study.

The Central Wasatch Commission’s Visitor Use Study through Utah State University is currently slated to be complete in October 2023. The addition of a Mill Creek Canyon Shuttle program and the necessary surveying and data collection could be encompassed by an addendum added to the CWC’s Visitor-Use Study.

Seasonal Canyon Use

Mill Creek Canyon is a seasonal and multi-use canyon. During winter months (when the winter gate is closed), visitors downhill and cross-country ski, snowshoe, trail run, and fat-tire mountain bike. During the remaining three seasons, visitors to Mill Creek Canyon hike and run along trails, road and mountain bike, fish, birdwatch, picnic, visit private cabins, and patronize private businesses. Dogs accompany human visitors for most of these activities, year-round.

Shuttle buses would also be equipped to haul road, mountain, snow bikes, and skis to allow for the continued multi-use of Mill Creek Canyon. Dogs would be welcomed to ride shuttle buses while wearing fitted muzzles.