

# October / November 2012 Newsletter

National Park Hospitality Association

## **NPHA, NPS WILL TEAM UP TO BOOST CELL AND INTERNET ACCESS IN PARKS**

Grand Thoughts at the Grand Canyon participants had excellent Verizon Wireless cell and WiFi internet access – a unique experience on the North Rim, where cell service is normally restricted to sporadic “spill-over” service from the South Rim and limited WiFi provided by Forever Resorts at the campground store. The augmented service was nearly invisible and drew many positive comments – including an NPHA board member who told the assembled group that the good service actually enabled him to extend his time at the meeting. And that is significant, because Chip Campsen is an important elected official in South Carolina in addition to roles as an active businessman and dad.

The service improvements were provided by two small satellite dishes linking to ViaSat and generating enough service for nearly 200 simultaneous users throughout the several acres occupied by the lodge and cabins and by a Verizon Wireless COLT (cell on light truck) unit, which was able to pick up and amplify signals from across the Grand Canyon and was parked hidden from view. Also interesting was the widespread use of the cell service and internet by other park visitors unconnected with the meeting!

During discussions, NPHA noted that it had requested a new Director’s Order supporting cell and internet access, replacing a provision that now addresses the visual impact of cell and internet facilities. NPS Deputy Director Peggy O’Dell made clear that she and the Director agreed that better cell and internet access was valuable to visitor safety and enjoyment and invited NPHA to nominate five parks as pilots for access improvements. NPHA accepted the offer. NPHA and its members described plans to pursue a system which, like many airports, provides free internet access for checking and sending emails but which charges for more robust internet usage. The “landing pages” for the free access would provide visibility for NPS and cooperating association information – including safety messages – as well as information about concessioner services in the park. In addition, NPHA plans to offer the NPS a “hot zone” around entrance stations, which could reduce the need for handing out printed materials and even facilitate fee collection through electronic devices.

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## **NPS/NPHA EFFORTS TO ENHANCE CELL AND WIFI SERVICE IN PARKS**

Verizon and a team involving ViaSat brought temporary top-notch internet and cellular telephone service to Grand Canyon National Park’s North Rim for NPHA’s Grand Thoughts at the Grand Canyon. The infrastructure was nearly

invisible and the resulting capabilities were widely praised – and prompted NPS Deputy Director Peggy O’Dell to propose a pilot effort in five parks as a team. NPHA members submitted a list of 11 parks to NPS along with a project overview which included the following goals:

- 1) Provide a basic level of non-fee internet access at all major, developed visitor areas in the national park system.
- 2) Provide basic cell phone service at all major visitor areas in national park units, as well as along most roads and at major sites such as trailheads.
- 3) Deliver timely, park-focused information within national parks through smart phones, tablets and computers.
- 4) Give individual parks discretion on where cell phone service is available, and whether the service provides full or emergency-only service.
- 5) Identify and employ best available and practical technologies that minimize visual impacts of cell and internet access systems.
- 6) Create special gateway zones at park entry points using downloadable data to replace both low-power radio systems and printed material hand-outs.
- 7) Design a system that is financially sustainable, generating revenues adequate to install, maintain and upgrade internet access. To do this, concessioners are offered the opportunity to develop and operate these systems, either individually or through a collaborative venture with other concessioners.
- 8) Offer additional bandwidth where possible to park visitors on a fee basis.
- 9) Coordinate efforts of the NPS, concessioners and friends organizations to create official park apps which can be readily downloaded to all major mobile channels, and which work to aid park visits, even when not connected to the internet, through GPS and other technologies.

Deputy Director O’Dell delivered the recommendations to the NPS Regional Directors and assigned John Wessels (NPS Intermountain Regional Director) and Sue Waldron (NPS Assistant Director for Communications and lead for the NPS “Go Digital” component of A Call to Action) to work with NPHA. The list is now being reviewed by the regional and park teams and final selections of five (maybe more!) sites will occur early in January. A strategy session in February involving NPS, NPHA and communications firms is likely.