

*Please note: this is a response from Andre Quenneville, General Manger at Mt. Norquay, to the editorial and accompanying editorial cartoon published in the Rocky Mountain Outlook on December 14, 2023.*

I am writing to provide corrections and clarifications to your Editorial from the December 14, 2023 Rocky Mountain Outlook “Aerial gondola adds minefield to Banff train station plan”. This editorial and the accompanying editorial cartoon misleads readers. It indicates that Parks Canada has turned down multiple town to Norquay base gondola proposals, that since a town to Norquay gondola is not mentioned in the 2022 Banff National Park Management Plan that Parks Canada will not consider such proposal, and that “Parks Canada has been adamant if an aerial gondola from the train station to Mt. Norquay Ski Resort is included in the ARP, it will not gain federal consent.”

Norquay has only made one proposal to Parks Canada for a gondola from train station to Norquay. Parks Canada will consider a second gondola proposal and does not need to be mentioned in the 2022 Banff National Park Management Plan for potential approval by Parks Canada. Lastly, The ARP does not include a proposal for an aerial gondola. Rather, the ARP includes a Transportation Services Centre within which is a gondola terminus as an aspirational project. As stated in the ARP “A municipality establishing zoning that can permit federal authorities to consider a project, does not prejudice the approval of the project – it merely facilitates the federal authorities’ consideration of the project.” Parks Canada will consider approval of the ARP including an aerial transit terminus under certain conditions.

For background, Parks Canada’s Mt. Norquay Site Guidelines 2011, which forms part of Norquay Ski and Sightseeing Resort’s lease with Parks Canada, specifies 33 times that Norquay should seek to reduce the impact on wildlife from visitor vehicles traveling on the Norquay Access Road. Norquay pursuing a gondola from the town of Banff to Norquay’s base as a potential solution to reduce visitor impact on wildlife is referenced 9 times in the Mt. Norquay Site Guidelines 2011. To advance a potential town to Norquay base gondola, the Mt. Norquay Site Guidelines 2011 specifies that Norquay is to work with Parks Canada and the Town of Banff. The Railway Lands Area Redevelopment Plan is the first time that Norquay and Parks Canada have engaged with the Town of Banff to advance a potential town to Norquay Base Gondola.

Following the Mt. Norquay Site Guidelines 2011, in 2015 Parks Canada provided Norquay with a high-level term of reference for a town of Norquay Base gondola. While there were several key elements of a town to Norquay Base gondola which were not specified in the terms of reference, Parks Canada, as is its custom with proponents regarding potential projects, would not provide Norquay further detailed guidance on its requirements until a proposal was made. In May of 2018, Norquay made its first, and so far, only proposal to Parks Canada for a gondola from town to Norquay. This ambitious proposal, the Norquay Summit Gondola proposal, included 4 stations that traveled from town to Norquay’s base, then to the top of the ski runs and on to the summit of Mt. Norquay. In December of 2019, Parks Canada informed Norquay that it would not approve the Norquay Summit Gondola proposal.

As a next step, Norquay and Parks Canada then met in May and June 2020 and reviewed a draft of a potential alternative proposal (which was never submitted for formal consideration) so that Parks Canada could discuss with Norquay for the first time the key elements that led Parks Canada to not approve the first Norquay Summit Proposal. This feedback included among other things the requirement that the Norquay access road would remain open to non-Norquay visitor vehicles and a gondola would not travel to Mt. Norquay’s summit but would have to terminate at the top of the ski runs. Parks Canada’s feedback also identified that a gondola terminus is not a permitted use under the Town of

Banff land use bylaw for the Railway Lands. This feedback from Parks Canada to Norquay was very constructive and is typical of the back and forth between Parks Canada and a project proponent.

Since June 2020, Norquay has not discussed with Parks Canada making a second town to Norquay base gondola proposal. In response to a question raised at a Banff Town Council meeting in August 2022 regarding the ability of Norquay to make a second gondola proposal, Parks Canada confirmed in writing to the Town of Banff in September 2022 that Norquay is able to make a second proposal for a town to Norquay base gondola.

Since there has not been a second Town to Norquay base gondola proposal made to Parks Canada, any reference by Parks Canada regarding a proposal by Norquay not being supported by Parks Canada refers to the Norquay Summit Proposal – Norquay’s first and, so far, only proposal to Parks Canada.

The 2010 Banff National Park Management Plan includes the potential for a town to Norquay Base gondola. Parks Canada has made clear that the 2022 Banff National Park Management Plan builds upon but does not replace the 2010 Banff National Park Management Plan. Including the potential for a town to Norquay Base gondola in the 2022 Banff National Park Management Plan would be redundant. There are many initiatives and priorities that were first identified in the 2010 Banff National Park Management Plan that Parks Canada continues to advance that were not mentioned in the 2022 Banff National Park Management Plan.

Parks Canada provided feedback in February 2023 on an earlier draft of the Railway Lands ARP provided by the Town of Banff to Parks Canada that the inclusion of passenger rail services and an aerial transit terminus could imply that the Minister of Environment and Climate Change approving the ARP was also approving a passenger train system from Banff to Calgary and a town to Norquay Base gondola. Consequently, subsequent to getting this feedback from Parks Canada, the ARP was revised to make clear that passenger rail services and an aerial transit terminus are to facilitate the aspirational projects of a passenger train system and a town to Norquay Base gondola and that both projects require separate approvals beyond the scope of the Town of Banff, and that the Minister of Environment and Climate Change approving the ARP in no way implies the Minister is “pre-approving” a passenger train system and a town to Norquay Base Gondola.

It was uplifting to see Parks Canada recently release the What We Heard Report on their Expert Panel on Moving People Sustainably in the Banff Bow Valley. To quote the report, “All over the world new examples of aerial transit exist and solve important transportation problems. They should not be overlooked as effective ways to reduce traffic.”

Importantly, the ARP is merely a planning document. All of the potential projects included in the ARP require additional approvals before anything can be built.

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