

Case Study #9

Town Seeks Road Through Purple Mountains Majesty

It was a dark and stormy September night in the small mountain community of Road's End, an isolated town adjacent to Purple Mountains Majesty National Park (PMMNP). An unexpected late summer snowstorm with high winds caused huge snowdrifts across the only road into Road's End, completely cutting off access to and from the town of 350. The road traversed two canyons and was subject to periodic closure.

Residents of Road's End were used to living in an isolated community and took fierce pride in their isolation. One of the three roads through Purple Mountains Majesty National Park did, in fact, end in their town. Residents noted that traffic could be so scarce that on a sunny day, dogs would take a nap on the warm asphalt road. On this September night, the snow response team had been caught off guard and was unable to keep up with the unseasonably fierce weather.

Mayor Justin Case had a worried eye on the storm and his two-year old granddaughter. His granddaughter was his pride and joy, and had suddenly come down with a high fever. Adding to Case's alarm, his granddaughter had respiratory problems and her breathing was becoming heavy. It was clear she needed medical attention quickly.

Travel by road was impossible. Mayor Case called 911 and was not surprised that air evacuation was precluded by the storm. Case spent a long, tense night at his granddaughter's side, watching over her and caring for her as best as he could. With the dawn, the storm cleared. A helicopter arrived with the daylight and flew Case and his granddaughter to the closest hospital, located in the town of Mountain Top. After a two-day stay in the hospital, Case's granddaughter recovered and was released.

Mayor Case and the Road's End residents were reenergized to take up their cause of obtaining a second road into their community. They had a perfect location already chosen—Sawyer Lane, a historic access through Purple Mountains Majesty that had been completely closed in the late 1960's.

Purple Mountains Majesty is one of the oldest national parks. Like other national parks that were created in the late nineteenth century, the US Army administered it until the National Park Service was founded. Areas of Purple Mountains Majesty were mined and logged through the early twentieth century. Those with a sharp eye can still find tracks of abandoned mining and logging roads.

Sawyer Lane was one of those old logging roads and was located on a barren, high, windy plateau that blew clear of snow even in the worst storms. It had been used to bring logs to the now shuttered sawmill in Road's End and had provided a second connection between Road's End and Mountain Top. Although the Park Service quit maintaining Sawyer Lane in the 1930's, it was used by off road vehicles and Land's End residents until the Park Service rendered it unusable in the 1960's.

The residents of Road's End petitioned the Chief Park Ranger of Purple Mountains Majesty to reopen Sawyer Lane. The residents claimed that it was in the best interest of the public safety and welfare for them to have a second access into their town. They noted the incident with Mayor Case's granddaughter was not an isolated one. Road's End had been asking for Sawyer Lane to be reopened for twenty years. During that time there were several documented cases of residents being unable to be transported to the hospital due to road closure and one documented death. People have been stranded as long as four days in Road's End, unable to leave the town because the road has been closed.

The petition stated that the lives and safety of residents and visitors were more valuable than the lives of the various animal species that resided in Purple Mountains Majesty and the animals would adjust to the reopened road. The road would have minimal travel and minimal impact on wildlife habitat. The Road's End Town Council unanimously passed a resolution supporting the petition. Three hundred people signed a separate document of support.

Purple Mountains Majesty is known for its spectacular mountain scenery and is home to deer, elk, buffalo, antelope, coyotes, bald eagles and a myriad of smaller species. The park is rich in biodiversity. It is regarded as a national treasure and is visited by over 1,000,000 people every year. There is an active watchdog group, Purple Mountains Forever that monitors activities within the park.

Supporters of the petition echo the arguments made by the residents of Road's End. They also note that Sawyer Lane would open up new hiking areas. Public safety is of utmost importance and human life is irreplaceable. Supporters note the Sawyer Lane is not a new road; it existed historically and is now being reopened. Living in a town with its only access road being closed for up to four days is an undue hardship.

The well-organized Purple Mountains Forever (PMF) leads opponents. PMF argues that Sawyer Lane travels through prime wildlife habitat that serves as a breeding ground for elk and a calving area for buffalo. The Lane will draw more use into a remote area of Purple Mountains Majesty and serve as a jumping off point for off-road vehicles in the summer and snowmobiles in the winter. New trees have flourished since the road was completely closed in the 1960's, and will be destroyed if the road is reopened.

PMF also argues that adding opening a new road in a national park is unprecedented and bad precedent. PMF is drawing national attention to the Sawyer Lane issue.

Other opponents note that the residents of Road's End are well aware of the road access limitations and are free to move elsewhere. Building and maintaining Sawyer Lane will cost taxpayers millions of dollars and benefit only a handful of people. This type of project is why America is trillions of dollars in debt.

Assume for the purposes of this case study that the Chief Park Ranger has the authority to make the Sawyer Lane decision. You are the Senior Environmental Resources Planner for Purple Mountains Majesty National Park and the Chief Park Ranger has asked for your recommendation. What is your recommendation?