

LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK



GIMME SHELTER

Rolf Diamant

Oh, a storm is threat'ning
My very life today
If I don't get some shelter
Oh yeah, I'm gonna fade away
— "Gimme Shelter," The Rolling Stones¹

In my most recent Letter from Woodstock, I mentioned that the Yosemite Conservancy was getting involved with employee housing.

The conservancy has purchased private land just outside the park for the construction of affordable housing. This initiative is envisioned as a necessary action to “support projects and programs that preserve Yosemite” by, in effect, helping to preserve the people

who staff those very same projects and programs. The conservancy has long focused on partnering on the revitalization of popular iconic places like Bridalveil Falls and Mariposa Grove, but the organization is now coming to grips with the sober reckoning that national parks will not run themselves without an adequately housed workforce of government, non-government, and volunteer workers—at least not for long.

To hire and retain good people takes more than a position description, FTE (available full-time positions), and salary. Employees (and their families) require decent affordable housing, reasonable transportation, and access to basic community services such as schools and medical facilities. The conventional expectation that most, if not all, of these needs might be met in nearby “gateway” communities is outdated and wishful thinking. In fact, whether this was ever true is debatable. Housing has always been a challenge for public and non-profit employees living in resort-oriented communities that cater to high-income second homeowners and tourists. It is certainly not the case today, as the price of homeownership has gone through the roof and the rental market has been warped beyond recognition by the conversion of long-term rental units to more lucrative short-term rentals. This trend—cashing in on rapidly rising park visitor numbers—has radiated outward from the gateway towns to surrounding communities as well.²

This is not only the case with the larger, higher-visitation parks, like Yosemite, Yellowstone, and Acadia; similar pressures are being experienced throughout the national park system. The superintendent of a modest-size park recently wrote me that “despite our recruitment efforts, this year we have not been able to hire any seasonal maintenance workers. We have worked through large lists of candidates, but none have accepted any offers. Similar recruitment challenges are reported at other parks.” The days are long gone when NPS officials could blithely expect—and actually attract—employees willing to be “paid in sunsets.” No doubt, low unemployment and more competitive salaries offered elsewhere are contributing factors, but the unavailability of affordable housing options is the ultimate deal breaker.

The chronic inability to fill seasonal jobs has knock-on effects that can derail park improvements large and

Multi-family employee housing at Grand Canyon National Park. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



small. In 2023, Acadia National Park was able to fill only 115 of 175 open seasonal positions, largely due to housing constraints. The popular Island Explorer bus service on the park's Loop Road, a key mechanism for cutting congestion and improving the visitor experience, scaled back service for similar reasons.³

Some gateway municipalities have responded to this housing crunch by creating affordable housing trusts and other mechanisms to gradually build new housing for their own struggling public employees, such as schoolteachers and police officers. Not a workable solution for park-related employees at the end of the queue. Hence, the realization by park managers and park conservancy leaders that they must take matters into their own hands, and move quickly. The NPS housing program (prioritizing required occupancy positions and seasonal hires) has historically been subject to fluctuating congressional appropriations, leaving it to the agency's non-profit partners to step up wherever possible. In this 32nd Letter from Woodstock I will discuss a few ways organizations, including some influential park partners, are re-assessing the shifting challenges parks now face, in particular the acute shortfall in affordable housing, and in response, appropriately reinterpreting and expanding their roles and responsibilities.

In these troubled times organizations need to stretch. I've previously written about the venerable New York Public Library (NYPL), a diversified system of branch and specialty libraries that is in some important ways not unlike a national park system.⁴ Both institutions, for example, have a steady stream of users seeking conventional services—hiking trails in parks, or books and DVDs in libraries. But look a little deeper; both parks and libraries also serve constituents as hubs for civic literacy and educational programming. NYPL provides information on health and wellness, including mental health programs, employment opportunities, food security resources, and access to affordable housing options. In the ongoing struggle to create “a more perfect Union,” national parks function as laboratories for ideas about sustainability, climate resilience, equity, and civic engagement.

Many years ago, I was on an international NPS mission to assist Georgian national parks as the country

was just emerging from a series of destabilizing and destructive civil and regional conflicts. When our party stopped at a park deep in the Caucasus Mountains, I inquired about a rather large vegetable garden outside the park headquarters building. It was explained to me that park staff were then being paid infrequently by the central government in Tbilisi, if at all. The garden was put in so everyone working at the park could at least have food on the table.

Housing, like food, is a necessity. If people are going to consider park employment as a viable occupation, employers must be flexible and innovative. Signals from NPS leadership have been mixed. It was jarring to recently learn that NPS Director Charles “Chuck” Sams was considering the closure of the Yosemite National Park Childcare Center, a non-profit childcare organization. Sams was apparently responding to a Department of the Interior Inspector General Report recommending standardized licensure for all childcare operations in national parks. Rather than go through that process, the NPS Washington Office evidently decided that it was just easier to shut down the Yosemite facility. The Coalition to Protect America's National Parks responded immediately, writing Sams: “This decision will not only impact current employees, but it will also harm recruitment and retention at Yosemite

Employees at essential park partner organizations are challenged to find affordable housing too. COURTESY THE AUTHOR

Yosemite NP Child Care Center is Hiring!

Apply Now!

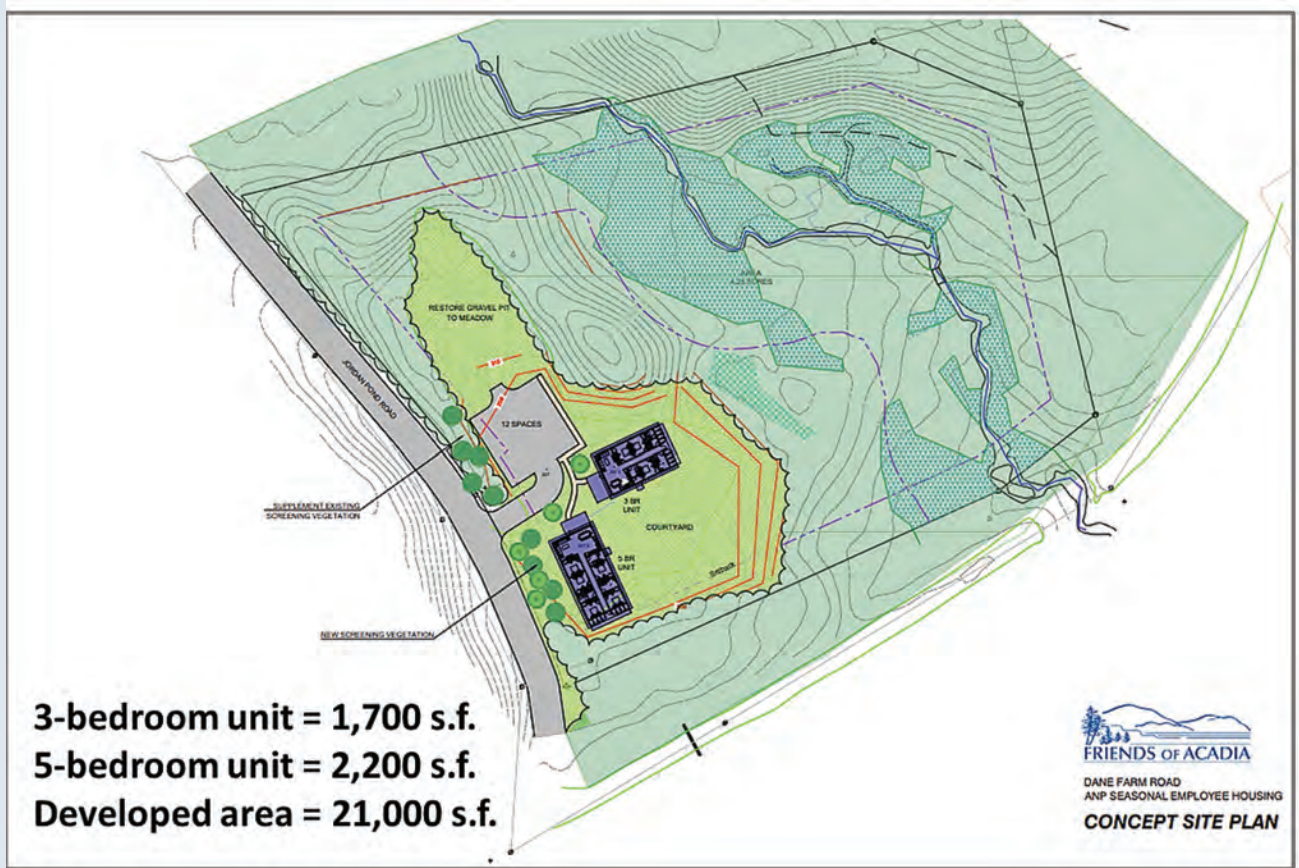
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- Early Childhood Education Opportunities

Spend your days exploring Yosemite National Park with some of the most curious little locals!

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El Portal Center: 209-379-2860
Yosemite Valley Center: 209-372-4819

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Seasonal employees are often best served by housing designed specifically for them. FRIENDS OF ACADIA

National Park in the future” and that closure would “reduce already low employee morale and create yet another barrier to building a more diverse workforce.”⁵

There is some encouraging news. Park friends are stretching beyond their traditional remit to provide more services to staff, not less. For instance, at Yosemite, faced with a dramatic rise in mental health needs of the park community, partially attributed to soaring visitor numbers and staffing shortfalls, the Yosemite Conservancy launched a new initiative providing “supplemental funding for affordable, professional mental health services, including crisis intervention and consultation, for park employees and residents.”⁶ Referring to the 40 acres of newly purchased land destined for affordable housing units, Frank Dean, the conservancy’s president and CEO, explained in the Spring 2024 issue of *Sierra* magazine that getting into housing was “a whole new paradigm for us to consider, but given the constraints the Park

Service is under, we are realizing we’re going to have to be in it for a longer haul.”⁷

Other park friends have stepped up as well. At Acadia, for instance, the Maine Coast Heritage Trust donated a key marshland area to the national park but reserved an adjacent parcel for the construction of 10 units of year-round workforce housing. The Friends of Acadia have purchased a former inn for conversion into seasonal employee housing and recently announced plans to build an additional eight energy-efficient homes for park employees.

Investments such as these are encouraging and can significantly augment NPS housing construction in a handful of parks. But the need is so great across the national park system that these efforts must be dramatically scaled up, and soon. Following on the heels of a \$40 million anonymous gift made through the National Park Foundation (NPF) to build 70 modular housing units at Yellowstone National Park,



LEFT A former inn in Southwest Harbor, Maine, will now provide housing for up to 10 seasonal employees at Acadia National Park. JULIA WALKER THOMAS / FRIENDS OF ACADIA
 RIGHT NPS officials cut the ribbon at a ceremony celebrating new employee housing. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

it has been rumored that NPF will soon launch a new and very large revolving fund. We can only hope that housing will continue as a high NPF priority for this fund—or else the people who take care of our national parks are “gonna fade away.”

ENDNOTES

1. “Gimme Shelter,” lyrics by Keith Richards / Mick Jagger, © Abkco Music Inc.
2. Rob Hotakainen, “NPS Employees Face a Worsening Housing Crunch as Prices Soar,” *E&E News*, February 1, 2022. <https://www.eenews.net/articles/nps-employees-face-a-worsening-housing-crunch-as-prices-soar/>
3. Murray Carpenter, “Acadia Jobs Go Unfilled Due to Labor and Housing Challenges,” *Maine Public Radio*, September 11, 2023. <https://www.mainepublic.org/business-and-economy/2023-09-11/acadia-jobs-go-unfilled-due-to-labor-and-housing-challenges>
4. Rolf Diamant, “For the Betterment of Everyone” (“Letter from Woodstock”), *The George Wright Forum*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2018). <http://www.georgewright.org/353diamant.pdf>
5. Coalition to Protect America’s National Parks, Letter from Philip A. Francis to Charles Sams, February 12, 2024. <https://protectnps.org/2024/02/12/coalition-urges-director-sams-to-keep-yosemite-national-park-childcare-center-open/>
6. The Yosemite Conservancy, Yosemite Community Mental Health Services Project. <https://yosemite.org/projects/yosemite-community-mental-health-services-2023/>
7. Molly McCluskey, “A Housing Crisis is Impacting the National Park Service,” *Sierra*, April 23, 2024. <https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/housing-crisis-impacting-national-park-service>

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