



County of Los Alamos

Council Meeting Staff Report

January 10, 2019

Agenda No.: B.
Indexes (Council Goals):
Presenters: Harry Burgess
Legislative File: 11542-19

Title

White Rock Cliff Cave - Hell's Hole Gate Project

Body

In July of 2017, a local teenager fell approximately 400' from a ledge outside of Hell's Hole cave, resulting in his untimely death. Prior incidents in the same location have also resulted in death and/or serious injury. While recognizing that there are many natural hazards in Los Alamos County, the family of the teen have approached County staff requesting that the County consider eliminating this particular hazard, either by blocking the specific entrance to the cave or by other means.

Harry Burgess (County Manager), has been a caver for the majority of his life and when he first heard of this request, Harry met with the family to discuss their concerns and potential suggestions. Following this meeting, Harry and his son Garron visited the cave, assessed the hazards, and took many pictures of the concerning areas. These pictures were then presented at a local caving club meeting (Pajarito Grotto), and the members of the Grotto offered their support in determining an appropriate solution that seeks to protect both the cave and the people visiting it. In November, several members of the Grotto visited the cave along with Mr. Burgess, and various solutions were discussed along with additional pictures taken and an initial survey of the size of the entrance (see attachments).

The purpose of the discussion this evening will be to obtain input from the committee as well as members of the public regarding the appropriate solution. At present, the suggested action would be to close/block the southernmost entrance to the cave, as this entrance provides access to a particularly exposed ledge - roughly two feet wide and covered with pea-sized rocks (rendering the ledge slippery) - that overlooks an approximate 400' drop. The cave has several other entrances that are safer to utilize (albeit still exposed), and therefore a blockage of this particular entrance would not prevent normal visitation of the cave. The purpose of the chosen suggested closure would be to prevent visitors from using this entrance as an exit, as the returning climb from this entrance is particularly exposed and its use is believed to be the cause of prior accidents/deaths.

This issue brings forth numerous other considerations, including:

- Should the County be altering the natural landscape in its open-space areas
- What are the liability concerns of addressing naturally occurring exposures
- Are there other similar, necessary improvements for public safety
- Does the County need to develop a policy for memorials within open space areas
- Are there other, less-impactful remedies such as signage (others?)
- Would this activity negatively affect the cave or wildlife it harbors

It is hoped that through a discussion, these concerns and any others may be identified and expanded upon in order to inform any potential solution that is considered.

Attachments

A - Hell's Hole Gate Project