Save Our Canyons would like to provide Salt Lake County, Millcreek City and the US Forest Service with some comments regarding an effort to pursue a FLAP grant to make modifications to Mill Creek Canyon. We are quite appreciative of the recognition that this canyon, as do many other Wasatch Canyons, need some attention to mitigate the impacts we are seeing to the land and to adjoining communities regarding recreational pressures. While we see the benefit of some of the projects, others cause us to question what exactly is our collective vision for this/these canyons. Our fundamental question is about access and capacity, primarily that the projects continue to be quite personal automobile centric at a time when we believe we need to be looking at transit-based solutions for these canyons.

We whole-heartedly support the improvements to drainage and closing of user created parking, but are concerned about accommodating that parking elsewhere in the canyon because it isn’t sustainable. If our collective goal is to continue to have a car based system in the canyon, then we should decide how many cars (and people that arrive in those cars) we want to accommodate rather than converting user created sites into formalized spots, or by enlarging other parking areas. This appears to be yet another instance of trying to resolve issues without having a plan or vision in which we are working toward. We also take issue with deceleration lanes and road-widening projects and believe that safety goals can be better achieved by reducing the number of personal autos rather than investing in additional infrastructure for autos, when transit improvements are recommended by recent plans.

We wish to be a partner in this project, but question whether we should be chasing highway grants that improve road corridors and expand in canyon parking when numerous plans governing the area discuss the importance of increasing transit service. Rather than converting undisturbed areas (or user created disturbances) into formalized parking, we’d rather see existing parking converted into needed amenities designed to a capacity that protects natural, irreplaceable values, such as water quality, forest and wildlife health.

One idea we think could improve this grant application is to look at projects through the lens of what we want, rather than attempting to put a bandaid on something that isn’t sustainable in the long run. First, we need to understand visitor capacity in terms of community values and environmental characteristics we seek to protect. Second, we need to decide if managing cars (as we do today) or managing people is the approach we seek and if indeed managing people is the desire, we need to decide the role of the personal vehicle in this mix. From there, we can decide where and how we get visitors to their destinations, understanding how and where to put associated amenities, tempered with other management goals (water quality, vegetation management, wildlife and fuels, for example). Of course, it is possible that some of the projects (repairing bridges, closing user-created parking, repairing crumbling roadways, and improving existing trailhead infrastructure, for example) might be good projects to undertake with this grant and don’t exacerbate the practices that we see as unsustainable.

A planned and phased approach where we draw a bright line between maintaining existing infrastructure and expanding infrastructure would be much more supportable to us. We believe we need less parking and improved transit, perhaps a net reduction of pavement in the canyon, whereas it seems as drafted, it might result in a net addition. At the end of the day, we think better utilization of hardened areas, rather than expansion of hardened areas in our canyons yields the best results for our community and for the Wasatch.