

New Yosemite park concessions contract sparks questions

By Michael Doyle McClatchy Washington Bureau and Mark Grossi The Fresno Bee

The surprising selection of a new concession operator at Yosemite National Park now faces scrutiny from lawmakers, local communities and park visitors.

With officials from the Philadelphia-based Aramark just starting to introduce themselves to key Yosemite-area players, they face questions on everything from why they were selected to what role Congress might play to what the company plans for Yosemite Valley.

Here's a first cut at some of the crucial questions.

So, why did the National Park Service select Aramark over the incumbent, Delaware North?

The park service still isn't saying a lot.

The announcement Wednesday that Aramark had been selected for the 15-year contract praised the company's "tremendous resources" and "extensive experience" and cited various "operational improvements" to come, including "enhancing food and beverage" services. Officials have not elaborated on how Aramark's bid specifically stacked up to Delaware North's.

The park service is also keeping mum about what other companies may have applied, citing what National Park Service spokesman Jeffrey Olson on Friday called "the need to protect the deliberative process."

The contract itself, estimated to be worth about \$2 billion, will be publicly available after it's been signed and the congressional review period has passed, in September.

Were National Park Service officials happy with the performance of Delaware North?

They say they were.

Yosemite National Park Superintendent Don Neubacher said in a statement Wednesday that Delaware North, the park's concession operator since 1993, "provided quality services and unforgettable experiences to millions of visitors."

On Jan. 5, McClatchy filed a routine Freedom of Information Act request for copies of the formal park service evaluations of Delaware North's performance at Yosemite for the years 2007-2014. The evaluations have not been provided.

What do the gateway communities bordering Yosemite think about the change?

In nearby Oakhurst, tourist business relies on a close relationship with the park, but the business community was not involved in the concession process. But Oakhurst, Mariposa and other communities are very involved in the restoration of Yosemite Valley, the park's tourist hub that includes Yosemite Falls, Half Dome and El Capitan.

The valley's traffic, buildings and parking will be changed to accommodate the Merced River Plan, which protects the central waterway running through the valley. The concession operator will be directly involved with projects.

Rhonda Salisbury, chief executive officer of the Yosemite Sierra Visitors Bureau in Oakhurst, said Delaware North Companies, the current concession operator, has been a "great partner."

“We hope Aramark will give the park the same love and attention that Delaware North did,” she said.

Does Congress have a say in this?

Yes, after a fashion.

The park service is required to submit for a 60-day congressional review contracts worth more than \$5 million a year or that last 10 years or more, Olson explained. Members of the House Natural Resources Committee and Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, though, do not have to formally approve it or take any action at all.

“They can make comments if they want,” Olson said.

What is Aramark doing in the meantime?

The company is making the rounds as it lays the groundwork for the contract’s formal start in March. In recent days, for instance, Bruce W. Fears, president of Aramark’s leisure division, spoke with Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Elk Grove, whose district includes Yosemite and the surrounding communities.

“We’ve begun to reach out to a number of key stakeholders,” Aramark spokesman David Freireich said Friday.

The company, moreover, is not a political novice. Aramark Sports and Entertainment Services employs the well-connected D.C. lobbying firm Heather Podesta + Associates, paying the firm \$130,000 last year, according to public records.

Will Aramark have to spend millions of dollars for the rights to use intangible assets, including such iconic names as the Ahwahnee Hotel?

Time will tell.

Since securing the Yosemite concession contract in 1993, Delaware North and its Yosemite subsidiary have obtained trademarks on the names of park landmarks, including “The Ahwahnee,” “Wawona,” “Badger Pass” and “Curry Village,” according to U.S. Patent and Trademark Office records.

The concession company valued the intellectual property in the trademarked names at \$51 million.

Yosemite spokesman Scott Gediman said Aramark and Delaware North will be working out those details, but the issues over trademark names have not been settled.

How important will the Merced River Plan be to Aramark’s future in Yosemite Valley?

Very.

After more than a decade of legal challenges, about \$100 million worth of projects are scheduled to move forward in an environmentally conscious remake of the valley. The embattled plan received more than 30,000 comments, and it will be closely watched.

The road system will be altered to create a better flow of traffic. Buildings within 100 feet of the river will be removed, as will temporary housing at Curry Village and around Yosemite Lodge. The new concession operator will be directly involved in many of the projects.

“Prospective bidders were asked to address the Merced River Plan projects,” Gediman said.