

Findings of the TBCA Survey on Teton Pass Winter Recreation: The Concerns and Solutions of Users

September, 2019



Photo by Kim Havell

The recommendations of this report represent the views of the Teton Backcountry Alliance Steering Committee, and not government agencies. The report was compiled by G. Kofinas (TBCA/UAF), J. Schmidt (UAA), and T. Turiano (TBCA). For more information about the survey contact info@tetonbackcountryalliance.org. Suggested citation: Teton Backcountry Alliance. (2019) "Findings of Survey on Teton Pass Winter Recreation: Users' Concerns and Solutions", Wilson, Wyoming. This report is posted at <http://tetonbackcountryalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/TBCA-2019Survey-FullVersion.pdf>.

Executive Summary

Teton Pass is a high-value recreational resource for winter backcountry uses, attracting skiers, snowboarders, and others from around the world. The number of winter recreationists has increased significantly over the past several decades. A 2018-19 counter administered by Friends of Pathways found that the total traffic entering and exiting the Teton Pass backcountry from 11/21/18 to 1/13 2019 was 11,709 people, with the highest day of use tallying 611 people on 12/13. Winter use of Teton Pass by recreationists is likely to increase in the future. Teton Pass also is an important roadway corridor that is critical to the economy of Teton County, Wyoming and Teton County, Idaho.

The high level of winter use and several near misses affecting the Highway 22 corridor during the winter of 2018-19 raised public and agency concern about issues related to Teton Pass winter backcountry use. In response, the newly formed Teton Backcountry Alliance (TBCA) administered an on-line survey to document winter recreationists' perspectives. The survey included open-ended questions about users' key concerns and solutions, and asked that people evaluate the necessity for specific short- and long-term actions. The survey also asked what people view as key codes of conduct for winter Teton Pass users. The survey was posted online and available to the public from April 12-19. This report summarizes the findings of the survey and makes recommendations by TBCA based on those findings.

Who participated?

1020 people participated in the survey, providing a significant portion of the total local Teton Pass winter backcountry users. 88% of respondents said they reside in the greater Teton area. 64% of the respondents were men, 34% women. 41% reported they used Teton Pass for winter recreation more than once a week, and 30% said they used it once a month. Most were skiers (51%), followed by snowboarders (39%), snowmobilers, snowshoers, and others. 40% of the survey participants were commuters with only 6% of them not being backcountry recreationists. Over half of the respondents were in their 30s and 40s.

Findings

Concerns and Solutions: Open-ended questions about concerns and solutions generated a rich set of answers. (Readers of this report are encouraged to review the individual comments if respondents in Supplement 1, posted [here](#).) Key reported themes included:

- Avalanches, user behavior, and highway safety were noted as the top three concerns. Concerns regarding parking, congestion, and fear of restrictions on winter uses were also noted.
- Solutions most commonly suggested include: closures of certain areas, more education, better parking, construction of snow sheds or a tunnel, shuttle services and more carpooling, better signage, use of fines with stronger action against violators, and parking permits.
- Many respondents also expressed their strong appreciation for the good work of the Teton Pass Ambassador and WYDOT.

Short-term solutions:

- Closures of Twin Slides and Glory Bowl were reported as necessary during periods of high avalanche danger and avalanche control work, however, most reported that a full-winter closure of these slide areas is not necessary.
- There was broad agreement on the need for laws and strict penalties for those who violate closures and put others and property at risk.
- Most respondents noted that there was a need to expand the Teton Pass Ambassador Program, and there was a need for more signage and on-line information for users.
- Parking on Teton Pass was identified as a serious concern. Currently the area at the top of Teton Pass is officially a “pull out” and not a designated parking lot or Forest Service parking lot. Most stated that solutions to parking problems needed to be addressed by providing more parking.
- A small group suggested the solution to congestion and parking issues that the parking at the top of the Pass be closed, forcing people to skin up and earn their turns.
- Most also said that a permit system for parking is needed, and most also indicated a willingness to pay a fee to park if the funding supported the Ambassador Program.
- Many commented that people walking and hitchhiking on Hwy 22 are a hazard to drivers, with some suggesting that walking and hitching on the highway be prohibited. A few noted that those wanting to ascend should skin up on the snowbank by the road.

Long-term solutions:

- The construction of snow sheds or a tunnel and the need for a Teton Pass winter corridor planning process received the most “very necessary” responses of all long-term solutions.
- Respondents stated there is a need for a shuttle service taking winter users from Wilson to/from the top of the pass.
- The development of pullout areas for picking up hitchhikers is necessary.
- While there was a reported need to expand the parking areas, the construction of a visitor/information center with bathrooms on Teton Pass was viewed by most as not necessary.

As a part of our analysis we cross-tabulated responses to see if different types of people (older vs younger, regular users vs sporadic users, male vs female) answered differently. We found no difference among groups in how they answered questions.

As a final note we add that while backcountry users had significant agreement about certain topics, in other areas there was limited to no consensus and in no areas was there was total agreement. This fact points to the need to be sensitive and attentive to those with different perspectives from the majority to gain better insight into the full set of users’ experiences.

TBCA Recommendations

Public involvement: The number of people electing to participate in the survey reflects the high level of interest and concern by winter users of Teton Pass. The results of the survey also make it clear that

winter backcountry users are concerned, not only for their continued use, but also for the safety of highway travelers. This interest leads TBCA to recommend that winter backcountry users be included in future management deliberations.

Closures: Because there is an overwhelming disinterest by the public in full-season closures of Glory Bowl and Twin Slides, the TBCA recommends that voluntary or formal closures be put in place when conditions are deemed dangerous (i.e., “red flag days”). During such closures, hikers on Glory would find signage closing the area right of the boot pack trail and left of the most southern GasX in the bowl.

Promote responsible behavior: The TBCA recommends 1) more public meetings and social media venues for discussing appropriate backcountry behavior, 2) the need for more self-regulation by users, and 3) the formulation and web posting of a Code of Conduct for winter Teton backcountry use. Expanding the current Teton Pass Ambassador program for a greater “presence” is part of this recommendation.

Parking and Pedestrians: Careful consideration of parking issues on Teton Pass are needed, and should be part of a long-term corridor planning process, as discussed below.

A Comprehensive Teton Pass Corridor Planning Process: TBCA supports initiating a Comprehensive Year-Round Teton Pass Corridor Planning Process with strong public participation. That process should address multiple issues related to winter recreational and highway use, including a discussion on:

- establishing a shuttle service to the top of Teton Pass for recreationists,
- expanding parking for winter recreationists,
- implementing a parking permit system,
- finding adequate funding for the Teton Pass Ambassador Program
- limiting hazards related to hitchhiking and pedestrians
- on-going management of avalanche risks and control.

Feasibility Study of Constructing Snow Sheds: Running parallel with a Comprehensive Planning Process, TBCA recommends that agencies undertake a snow shed feasibility analysis of engineering options, economic considerations (including the cost to workers and employers when the Pass is closed), wilderness values, ecological impacts, and social factors.

Winter recreational use of Teton Pass is an important resource and longstanding part of the region’s history. Highway 22 is now a critical corridor for workers, businesses that depend on workers and supplies, travelers, tourists, and recreationists. Much effort is needed by all to identify a robust set of solutions that are sensitive to the full set of public interests.

For more information contact: info@tetonbackcountryalliance.org



FULL REPORT

Background

During the spring of 2019, the Teton Backcountry Alliance (TBCA) developed and administered a survey to Teton Pass (TP) winter recreationists. The survey was prompted by public concerns related to the safety of highway drivers and skiers on TP and the overall quality of the winter recreational experience in the area. The goal of the survey was to document what winter recreationists' view as the nature of current winter use issues and the preferred and most effective solutions. This goal follows from the belief by TBCA that user participation in the management of TP is critical in finding robust and sustainable solutions.

Note: The survey, including its findings and summary conclusions, does not represent the views of government agencies that manage land, highway use, and recreation on Teton Pass.

Method

The survey targeted recreationists who make use of Teton Pass in winter – skiers, snowboarders, snowmobilers, snowshoe hikers, sledders and others. The survey included both open and close questions, and asked about a range of topics. (See text box 1)

The survey was formatted and posted on line using Survey Monkey software (www.surveymonkey.com). Before it was released to the public, the survey was revised by the TBCA Steering Committee, select staff from WYDOT and Bridger Teton national Forest, and members of the public. A copy of the full questionnaire is posted [here](#).

The survey was posted and open from April 12-19, 2019, and announced to the public through the TBCA Facebook page and several articles that appeared in newspapers in the region. 1021 respondents participated, on average completing 79% of the survey and typically spending about 11 minutes.

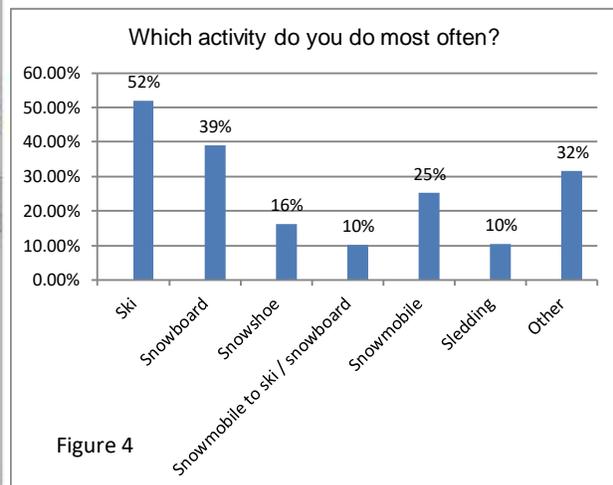
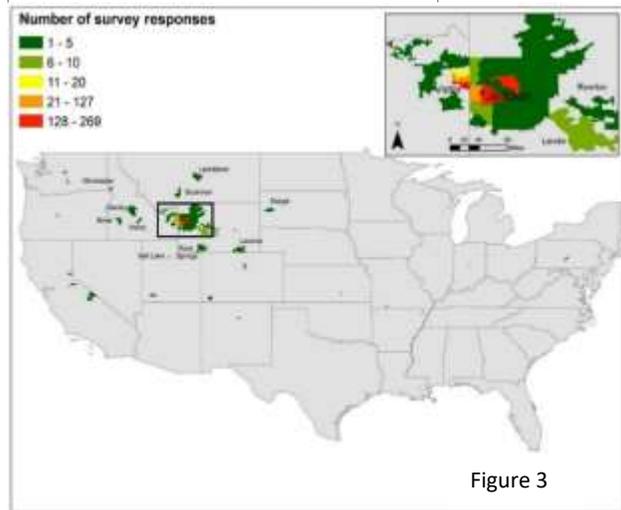
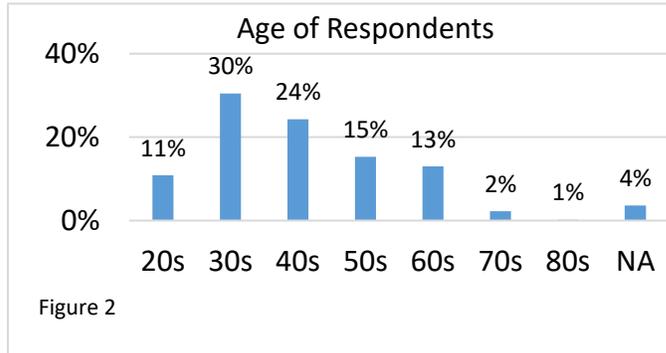
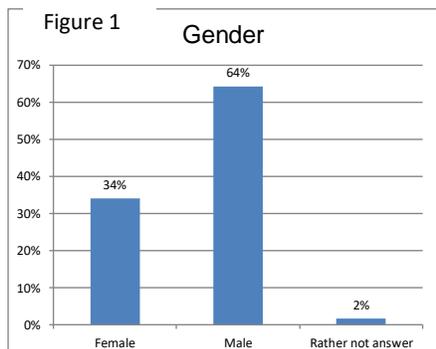
Textbox 1: Topics Addressed by the Survey

- Information about the respondent
- Three major concerns and three solutions
- Short-term solutions
 - Avalanches
 - Parking
 - Education
- Long-term solutions
- Code of Ethics
- Other comments

Results

Who Participated in the Survey:

64% of those participating were males and 34% females, with 2% unidentified. (See Figure 1). 88% were from the immediate Teton Area, with the others from the greater Mountain West and across the US. (Figure 3)



Most of the respondents were skiers (52%) and snowboarders (39%). Only 10% snowmobile to ski or snowboard. (Figure 4) 41% reported they used Teton Pass for recreationally either several times a week or once a week, and 30% use it for recreation several times a month. (Figure 5) Of all survey participants, 40% use Highway 22 for commuting. Only 6% of all respondents did not recreate on TP and used Teton Pass only for commuting. Ages of respondents ranged from those 20 yo to 23 people in their 70s and 80s, with over half in their 30s and 40s. (Figure 2). Interestingly, more than half of the respondents reported they had started winter recreating on Teton Pass since the 2000 decade. (Figure 6) This means that most of these users did not experience early skiing ethics, such as the common rule that there be little to no skiing of Glory Bowl until spring. Seven respondents have recreated on TP in winter since the 1960s and 1950s.

Figure 5

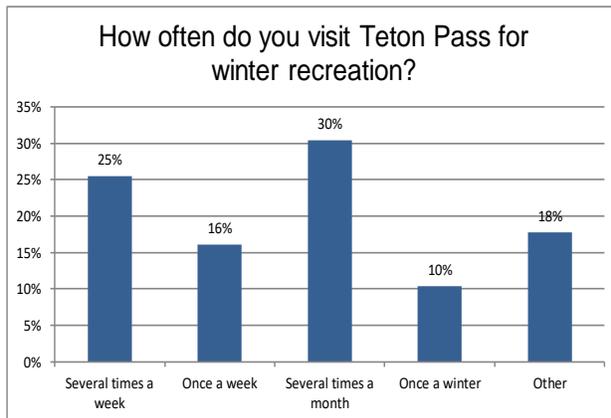
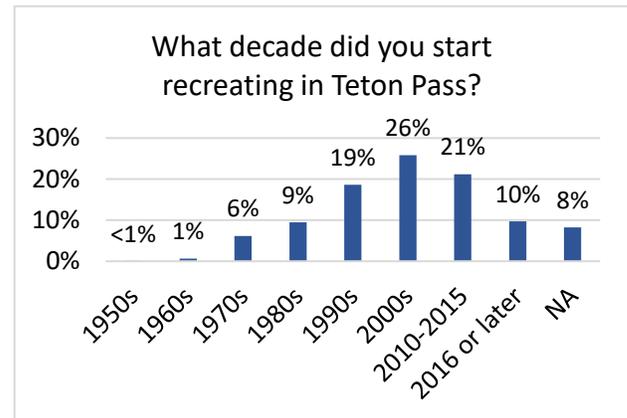


Figure 6



Concerns (open-ended question)

Survey respondents were asked to list what they view as the three greatest concerns for winter recreational use of Teton Pass. They were not asked to prioritize their listing. Concerns were coded into major categories and using random sampling, quantified to determine frequency.

827 of the respondents reported concerns. Seven major themes were identified. Concern regarding **avalanches**, those triggered naturally and by winter users, was most frequently reported. The second most mentioned concern had to do with **user behavior**. In this category respondents noted a range of behaviors such as irresponsible behavior, lack of experience and lack of concern for others, recreationists' sense of entitlement, "hubris", skiing/riding slide paths in dangerous conditions, and the skiing of road cuts. The third most frequently mentioned concern, also related to avalanches, was **highway safety**, due to possible avalanches causing harm to drivers or closing the pass to traffic. The fourth most mentioned concern was **fear of restrictions** on users and imposed closures to skiing areas on Teton Pass. Concerns regarding **parking** was the fifth most listed concern, including concern about problems finding parking and a sense of chaos around the parking situation on top of TP. Several other concerns were mentioned – **congestion** from too many users; dogs and dog poop; concern from drivers who but pedestrians in dangers; commuter access; out-of-town tourists; guiding; the number of commuters. "Safety" as an overarching concern was also mentioned by some.

Solutions (Open-ended questions):

After the open question about concerns, respondents were asked to list what they see as the solutions to those concerns. 784 responds reported solutions to their concerns. The list below orders a coding of responses into various categories, with number of responses. Appendix A of this report lists the full comments by category. Comments on closures, education, and parking related made up slightly more than 50% of the comments. Solutions related to sheds, shuttles and carpooling, signage, fines and disciplinary actions, and a permit system constituted about 20% of the responses. Reading the actual comments provides the reader of this report a rich description of the range of ideas expressed by users.

Table 1: Frequency of solutions reported by respondents in open-ended questions

- Closures (237)
- Education (96)
- Parking (78)
- Sheds/ A Tunnel /Avalanche Barricades (53)
- Shuttle/carpooling (35)
- Signage (23)
- Fines, Disciplinary Action, Shame (23)
- Permit System (20)
- Walking on roads & hitchhiking (17):
- References to WYDOT (15)
- Behavioral change (9):
- Ambassador Program (8)
- Limit numbers (5)
- Dogs (5):
- Don't know (5)
- Driving (4)
- Other (35)



Photo by Jimmy Chin

Necessity of Specific Short-Term Solutions

A list of possible short and long-term solutions were generated from discussions at TBCA public meetings, and with one-on-one discussions with members of our community. Respondents were presented with this list and asked whether these possible short-term solutions were “very necessary”, “somewhat necessary”, or “not necessary”. They were also given an opportunity to add comments about various set of “solutions”. These findings are illustrated in Figures 7-10.

Closures: Most respondents reported that they found a need for restrictions on human presence on Glory Bowl and Twin Slides during periods of avalanched mitigation by WYDOT and during periods of CONSIDERABLE, HIGH, and EXTREME avalanche conditions as defined by the BTNF Avalanche Forecast Center. However, most users report it was not necessary to close these areas to recreational use for the entire winter season. There was mixed perspectives on closing areas above highway road cut.

People on the Road: There were mixed responses on whether pedestrian traffic should be allowed in the road bed although the very necessary and somewhat necessary responses were greater than those saying it was not necessary. Most respondents, however, also said hitchhiking should occur only in plowed pull out areas and not areas such as the bottom of Glory Bowl.

Laws and penalties: There was high agreement that there is a need for laws and strict penalties for those who violate closures or who cause damages.

Education and Presence: Respondents agreed (very necessary 48%; somewhat necessary 39%) there is a need to expand the Teton Pass Ambassador program to have more ambassadors to communicate directly with winter recreationists. There was overall agreement that better signage on TP stating what is expected of users was very necessary (67%) as well as more on-line information about uses, hazards, laws and etiquette for users on Teton Pass (48%). (Figure 8)

Parking: Most agreed with the solution that no more than five cars at one time wait for parking on the top of TP and if one arrives to find five cars waiting (36% very necessary; 35% somewhat necessary), they would leave the area to avoid congestion. While 25% reported the a parking permit was not necessary on TP, the Shovel Slide overflow lot, Coal Creek, and Philips Bench lots, most reported that it was very necessary (37%) or somewhat necessary (27%). 72% also stated that they will be willing to pay a fee to park if the proceeds went to support the Teton Pass Ambassador Program or facilities on the Pass. (Figure 9-10)



Muggs Schultz and Betty Woolsey [prepare for a run on Telemark Hill during the winter of 1959-60
(Photo courtesy of Trail Creek Ranch Collection and Tom Turiano)

Figure 7:

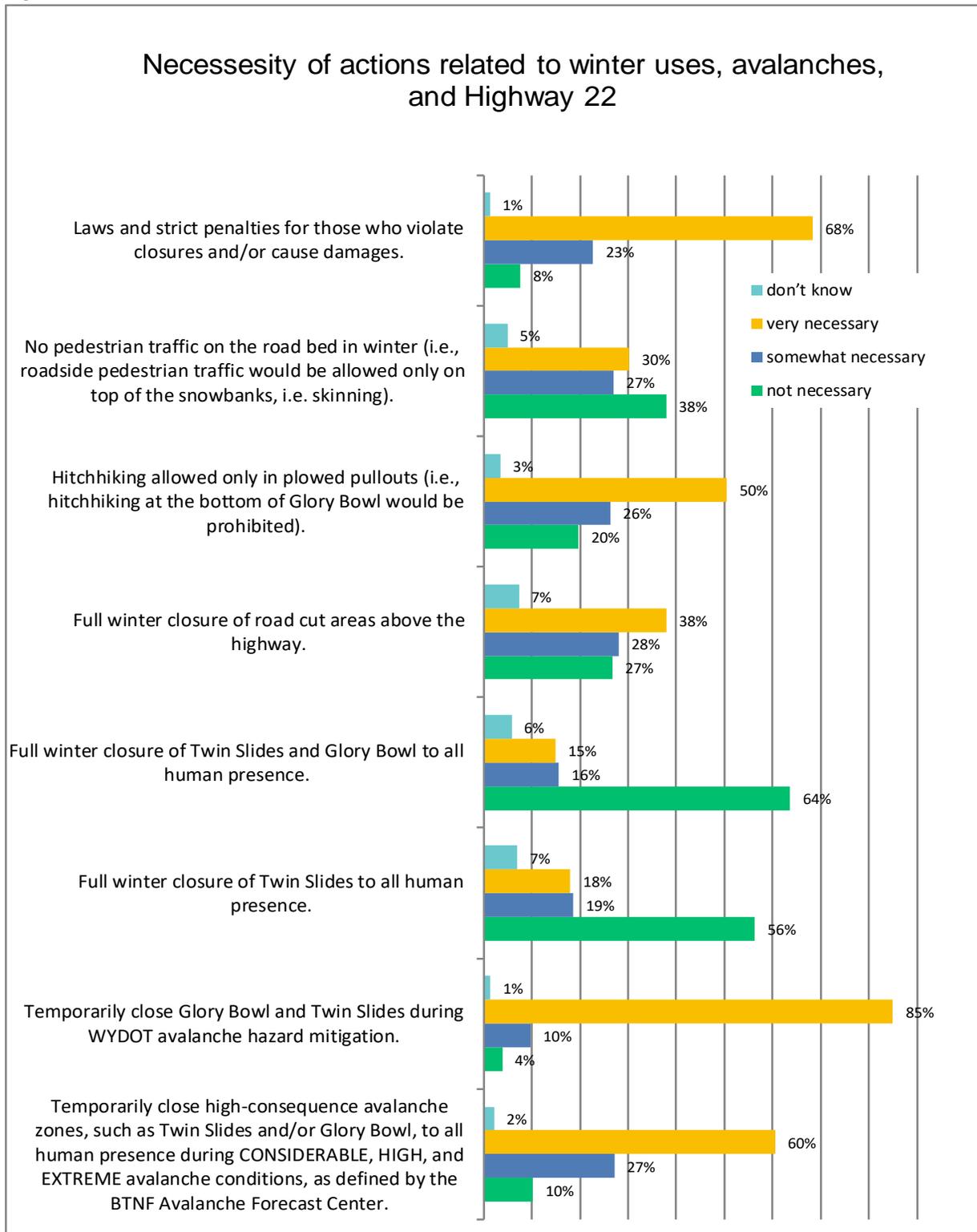


Figure 8

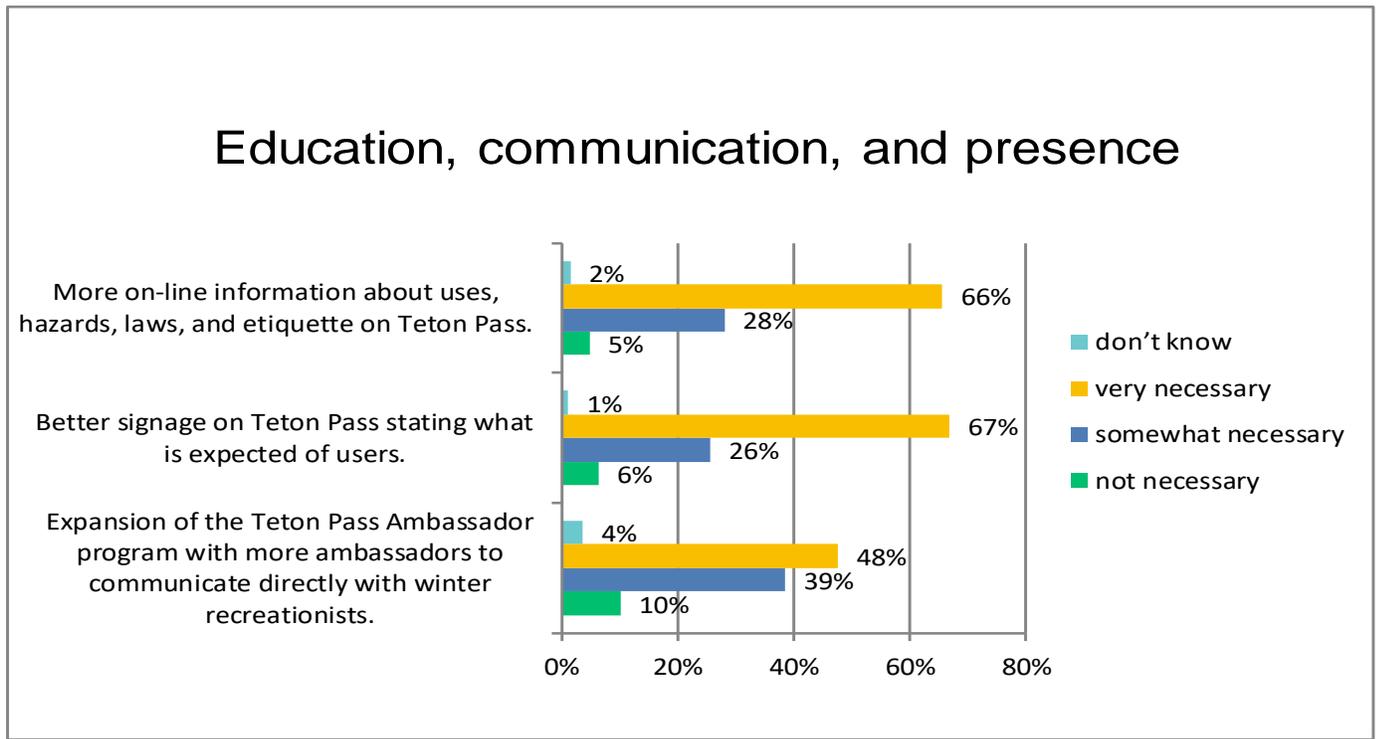


Figure 9

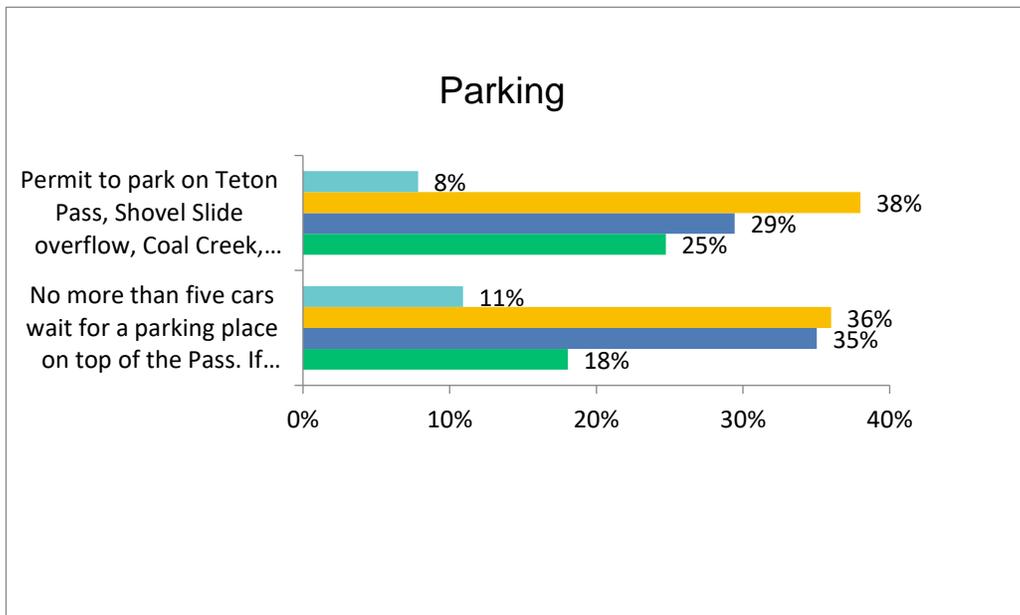
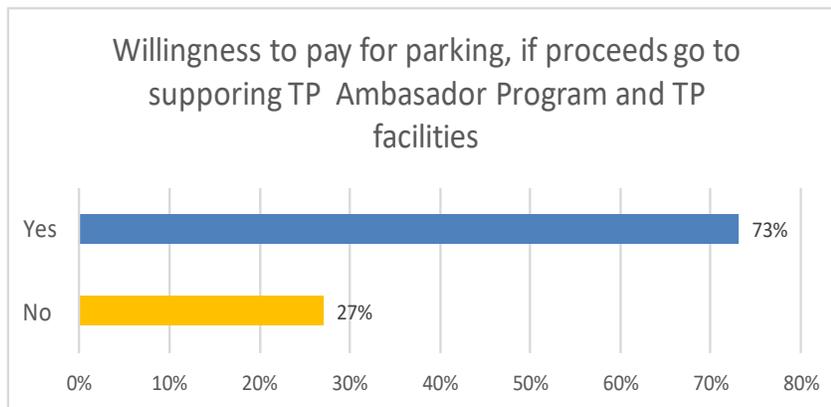


Figure 10



Long-term Solutions

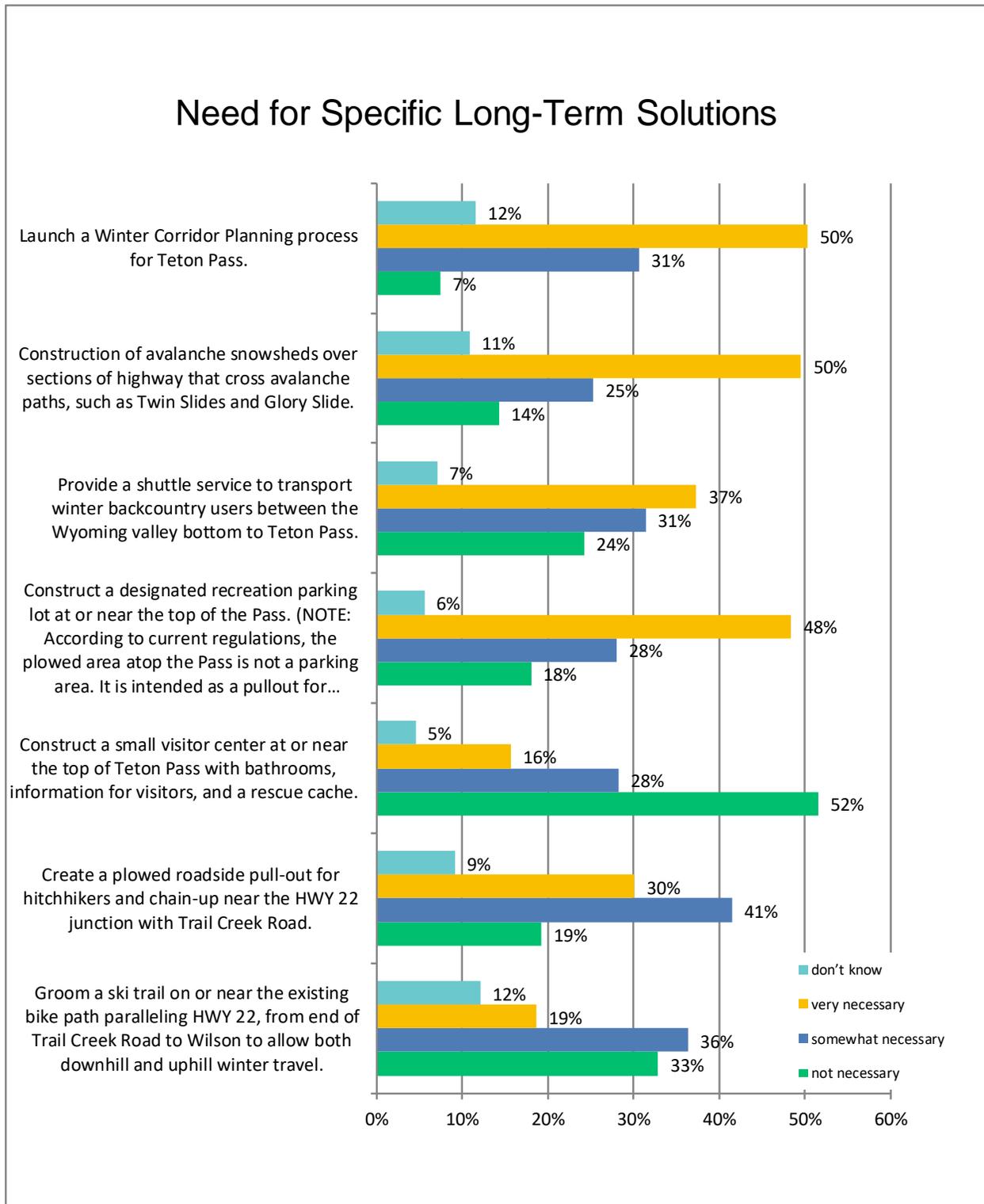
Similar to the short-term questions, respondents were asked the necessity of a list of long-term solutions. Long-term solutions fall into several categories as reported below. (Figure 11)

Corridor planning: 81% of the respondents felt it was somewhat or very necessary to launch a Winter Corridor Planning process for the Teton Pass area. This solution along with the construction of snowsheds received the most “very necessary” responses.

Sheds: The need for snowsheds received the highest combined score (somewhat (25%) + very necessary (50%)) responses, and speaks to recreationists’ high concern for highway safety.

Shuttle service, parking, and other recreational support facilities. 68% of the users stated that a shuttle service going between the Wyoming valley bottom to the top of TP was very or somewhat necessary. 76% indicated there was a need for additional parking on top of TP to be constructed, differing from the ad hoc (unofficial) parking area currently present. A relatively large group (52%), however, stated that a visitors’ center with bathrooms on TP, was not necessary. There was a 71% perceived need for a plowed pullout/hitchhiking pick up area near the Trial Creek/Hwy 22 junction. A groomed trail that parallels Hwy 22 from Trail Creek Road to Wilson (at the location of the existing pathway) was not strongly viewed as very necessary, and received about a third not necessary responses.

Figure 11



Code of Ethics

A question asking respondents to list what they would include in a code of conduct for winter recreational use of Teton Pass was included in the survey. Survey participants were allowed three text boxes to respond and 3066 responses were entered. The TBCA will be summarizing these suggestions for a code in a separate report.

Cross tabulated results:

As a part of our analysis we cross-tabulated responses to see if different types of people (older vs younger, regular users vs sporadic users, male vs female) answered differently. We found no difference among groups in how they answered questions. Tables of cross-tabulated results are provided in Supplement 2, which is posted [here](#).

Discussion and Conclusion

The number of people who participated in this survey speaks to the high level of interest by winter recreationists of Teton Pass and their concern for emerging issues that threaten both their safety and access. For many Teton Pass has long been an important area for relating to nature in the winter, recreating outdoors with friends, and learning about winter travel skills. The area's easy access, excellent snow, and a variety of abundant terrain contribute to its popularity. The high number of survey participants also speaks to an overall increase in popularity of winter backcountry skiing and snowboarding over the last few decades, a trend expected to continue. From a survey research perspective, the number of survey participants also allows us to generalize results to local population of the winter Teton Pass recreationists as a whole. The TBCA believes these findings can inform decision makers and help the public continue its deliberations on what are the concerns and appropriate solutions to those concerns.

The high level of consensus on particular solutions or actions suggests those actions are likely to be well received by the public if implemented. Conversely, implementing an action that is not perceived as needed may come with greater public resistance. For example, regulations such as full-winter closures of Twin Slides and Glory may will come with difficult in compliance and enforcement. TBCA recommends that management agencies consider these points when making decisions. Moreover, the "solutions" included in the survey do not specify the details of actions, and therefore many more discussions that include a public voice (recreationists, Teton Pass commuters, etc.) are needed if the proposed Teton Pass Corridor Plan goes forward.

Clearly, the winter recreationists of Teton Pass care deeply about Teton Pass, the safety of Highway 22 motorists, and their continued access to the backcountry. Their concerns regarding the inappropriate behavior by fellow skiers and boarders points to the need for greater responsible use, and in some cases, a culture change.-How do we do we accomplish this change? A list of specific recommendations of the TBCA that are informed by this survey appear in the Executive Summary of this report. In addition, TBCA will continue to encourage all Teton Pass winter backcountry users to be vigilant in their own actions, and where necessary, kindly encourage others to do the same. As our Teton Pass Ambassador, Jay Pistono, puts it "You can't have all the freedoms with none of the responsibilities".