Visitation to America’s National Parks has almost quadrupled during the last half century, creating a traffic and visitor congestion crisis in many places. Drawing on examples from three National Parks, this session explores how the Park Service is redefining the visitor experience, both physically and operationally, to adjust to the demands and challenges of the 21st century.

Rebecca Finn, ASLA, is an Associate Principal with Rhodeside & Harwell, a landscape architecture, planning and urban design firm in Alexandria, VA, Newark, NJ and New York, NY. Educated both in her native Australia and at the University of California, Berkeley, Rebecca has 15 years of experience as a landscape architect and urban designer in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia. Her work with the National Park Service (NPS), in some of the nation’s most treasured landscapes, has made her realize that congestion is not just an urban issue. Most recently she has worked with NPS at Arches National Park, Muir Woods National Monument and Gettysburg National Military Park to improve the visitor experience through site design.

Cathleen Sullivan is a Senior Associate at Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates, a multimodal transportation planning firm headquartered in San Francisco, CA. She specializes in long-range, multimodal planning and transit planning with a focus on integrating land use and transportation decisions to improve mobility and quality of life. Cathleen has worked on a number of transportation planning projects for the National Park Service, most recently for Arches National Park and Bandelier National Monument. She focuses on designing multimodal access systems that reduce resource impacts in sensitive park environments while improving public access and the visitor experience within realistic budget constraints.

J. Patrick Shea, Jr., FASLA, is a senior project manager/ transportation technical specialist providing planning, design and project management services throughout the National Park Service since 1974. Within NPS national programs and project roles, Patrick has provided leadership and national expertise throughout the United States. Emphasizing transportation planning within park and gateway communities, Patrick has implemented projects that enhanced visitor experiences with unique transportation and site design solutions throughout the National Park System. Previous experiences have varied from park landscape architect to legislative affairs. He was educated at Michigan State University and University of Colorado.
Session Outline
FRI-D08 3:30 PM - 5:00 PM

I  Introductions and Overview
a) Congestion crisis defined: increased visitation at National Parks and the broad impacts on the visitor experience
b) Learning objectives

II  Visitation at America’s National Parks
a) National Park Service (NPS) mission and the NPS visitor experience
b) Opportunities and challenges of visitor experience management with increased visitation
e) Behind the visitation numbers and associated impacts

III  Re-scripting the Visitor Experience I: Planning a New Shuttle System at Arches National Park
a) Goal: A mode shift away from private automobiles
b) A structured approach – market-based, catering to a specific visitor
c) Trade-offs: high-cost solutions that maximize visitation (shuttles) and low-cost options that constrain visitation (reservation system)
d) Site design: Minimizing impact of associated infrastructure

IV  Re-scripting the Visitor Experience II: Improving the arrival sequence at Muir Woods National Monument
a) The visitor experience at Muir Woods
b) Congestion management options: operational and physical improvements
c) Site Design: The preferred visitor experience
d) Adapting environmentally significant landscapes

V  Perspective: Reflecting on the Visitor Experience at Zion National Park
a) The Zion visitor experience within 1990’s
b) The Zion visitor experience with the Zion Transportation System, 2000 to today
c) Partnering for planning and operations

VI  Conclusions
Learning Objectives
FRI-D08 3:30 PM - 5:00 PM

1. Understand the concept of visitor experience in National Parks and how to address congestion without losing the essence of the traditional National Park experience.
2. Learn about approaches for improving visitor experience in these environmentally and culturally sensitive places, while balancing access-for-all and resource impacts.
3. Learn about the range of operational and physical solutions to combat congestion.
THE STORY
The beauty and accessibility of Arches National Park has attracted ever-increasing numbers of visitors from around the world. Over the past 10 years, visitation at Arches National Park has grown an average of 4 percent per year, reaching a record 1 million visitors in 2010. Visitation now far exceeds the park’s automobile capacity; severe parking and traffic congestion is degrading the visitor experience and impacting the fragile desert ecosystem. The objective of this fast-paced project was to evaluate options to reduce the number of automobiles within the park while improving public access and the visitor experience. This project studied shuttle and non-shuttle options to meet these goals.
MUIR WOODS NATIONAL MONUMENT, CA

PARK SIZE  522 acres

ANNUAL VISITATION 2012  972,331 visitors

THE STORY  Visitation to Muir Woods has tripled over the last half century and vehicular congestion now severely affects the visitor experience. Summer days can attract crowds of more than 6,000 visitors. Two small parking lots provide a mere 135 spaces leaving most visitors to find parking along the access road shoulder, where the line of parking often stretches for miles without providing a safe pedestrian route back to the park entrance. A seasonal shuttle system from a satellite parking lot relieves some of the congestion, but most visitors still arrive by private vehicle at the park entrance and ultimately face these dangerous and confusing conditions.

The Park Service is exploring a range of operational and physical improvements aimed at enhancing the visitor experience and streamlining the arrival process without negatively impacting this treasured natural resource.
ZION NATIONAL PARK, UT

PARK SIZE  143,000 Acres

ANNUAL VISITATION 2012  2,973,607 Visitors

THE STORY  In 2000, after nearly 25 years of increased visitation, associated visitor and resource impacts, and alternative transportation planning efforts, Zion National Park and the Town of Springdale, initiated a visitor transportation system that has drawn global interest for collaboration, sustainability and transportation successes. Partnering at multidiscipline and multiagency levels, the Zion Transportation System, integrated site, structure and transportation elements into a unique resource-based experience that managed increasing visitation, protected resource and community values, and promoted multiple take-home lessons for national and international visitors. Landscape architects provided planning and implementation leadership to create a unique, collaborative framework that serves as a role model for park and gateway community planning and other transportation challenges.