Summary:

The summer of 2019 spurred much discussion around North Star river use. The North Star Nature Preserve Management Plan is in the process of being updated, but will not be adopted until May of 2020. Staff is updating the commercial operator permit language for 2020 and any additional updates in the new Management Plan will then take effect in 2021.

Open Space and Trails began issuing new permits to commercial operators at North Star Nature Preserve after the BOCC adopted the 2015 North Star Nature Preserve Management Plan. In the 2000 North Star Nature Preserve Management Plan, commercial use of North Star was limited to one river-use business, along with a commercial paragliding company. The 2015 Plan allowed multiple operators to apply for a permit, but limited commercial groups to 6 people including the guide/instructor. All groups are required to be shuttled to and from North Star. The number of operators seeking North Star permits has grown annually since 2015. In 2019, OST issued 11 North Star permits to operators for shuttle services and/or guided boating (up from 10 permits in 2018).

The 2015 Management Plan also had an action item regarding river use counts. Staff tried both infrared counters and motion-triggered cameras. It took a few years to get kinks worked out around the challenges of collecting data over water (motion and reflection pose issues). Infrared does not work consistently over water. Staff experimented with various camera locations in an effort to successfully record river users. In 2018, placement of a camera on the James H. Smith Open Space portion of North Star finally produced consistent images that allowed OST to tally most river use. The camera location is upstream from the put-in at South Gate so those who launch at South Gate (the favored put-in when high water makes upstream bridges problematic) are not included in the camera counts.

For 2020, Staff is making refinements to the permitting process ahead of any changes that may occur as part of the 2020 update to the Management Plan. These permit language refinements are the next evolution of the commercial-use management at North Star and create a stronger partnership with the Forest Service. The refinements also have clear and hard due dates that operators are required to meet in order to retain their permits. There is also a change regarding launch timing.

In 2020, all North Star permittees must complete the OST permit process between Jan. 1st and March 1st. This includes submitting a signed permit, paying a $150 permit fee or $50 annual...
renewal and providing the required certificate of liability insurance. Only permittees in good standing with OST will be eligible for a 2020 permit. Those who fail to meet the March 1st deadline will not be issued a permit for 2020. The March 1st date works with the deadline to submit an application to the U.S. Forest Service on March 15; Forest Service authorization is required in order to use the Wildwood launch. The Forest Service will only consider applications from operators who have an OST North Star permit in place.

The commercial boating season at North Star is May 1st through Oct. 31st. All operators must report their user days at the Preserve by Nov. 15th and pay the user fee of $1.25 per client by Nov. 30th (the user fee is unchanged since it was first implemented for North Star operators in 2016). Operators who miss the deadlines will not be eligible for a North Star permit the following year.

All North Star permittees will receive one courtesy email reminder of the November deadlines in late October and one courtesy email reminder of the March 1st permit deadline in early January.

Currently, commercial operators are required to report users per month at North Star. Starting in 2020, operators will be required to report shuttled clients versus guided clients per month, and report the number of clients launched at Wildwood versus South Gate.

Also in 2020, a two-strike system in which any North Star operator who is cited for two violations of their North Star permit in a season will have their North Star permit suspended for the remainder of the year. They will be required to report use up to the suspension date and pay the user fee immediately. An operator whose North Star permit is suspended will not be considered “in good standing” for a North Star permit the following year. If a permit holder loses their “letter of nominal effects” from the Forest Service (for permit violations on the Forest), they would also lose their permit to operate at North Star.

All North Star commercial operators will be required to shuttle users in vehicles that are clearly marked with their business name. Both sides of commercial vessels will also need to be labeled with the operator’s name. A list of permitted operators will be posted at Wildwood, South Gate and the Takeout.

Staff will begin outreach to inform operators of the 2020 regulation changes after the Boards’ review. Staff has scheduled a meeting with the operators to review permit updates and 2020 Management Plan update process.

**Attachments:** Permit process update and use summary

**Staff Recommendation:**
Boards provide feedback on the 2020 permit updates.