

TO: RMBL scientists, students, staff, and other stakeholders
FROM: Ian Billick, Kelly Sudderth, Jennie Reithel, Brett Biebuyck, and Steve Jennison
RE: Review of 2022 Operations
DATE: November 9, 2022

Thank you for another great summer of research and education! Each year we ask for your feedback and formally assess operations at the close of the summer season. We do this so we can: 1) identify changes that would be beneficial, and 2) prioritize those changes, balancing financial and staffing constraints. This memo communicates:

- 1) Our synthesis of this year's feedback,
- 2) Goals for improving future operations (both in 2023 and longer-term)
- 3) Highlights of unique challenges and trends we will continue to navigate in our operations, and
- 4) Our progress on the goals we set for 2022.

As a reminder, in 2020 RMBL published a visual guide on RMBL decision-making. The objective of this project was to equip the active scientist community and other interested stakeholders to effectively engage in and shape decision-making at RMBL. If you have not already done so, we encourage you to study the guide, which can be found on our website: [Visual Guide on RMBL Decision Making](#).

What did the evaluation process look like this year?

We received 66 responses for the online exit survey at the end of the summer. Staff conducted in-person exit interviews with 13 members of the community. We also relied on staff observations and feedback that we received in-person through the summer.

How do we use your feedback and responses?

You are the RMBL users – so your feedback is important to us. You see things that we don't or won't see because of how you interact with what RMBL offers. We compiled the results of the online surveys, exit interviews and other informal feedback, which we are using to inform our operational planning and budgeting for 2023.

In addition to our annual evaluation to improve operations in future years, we also solicit feedback to identify opportunities to improve operations quickly. In prior years this was anonymous feedback. However, we found that we were often unable to follow up on anonymous feedback because more information was needed. This year we began taking such feedback at admin@rmb.org, which allowed us to improve responsiveness. We preserved anonymous feedback by taking comments at Kelly Sudderth's office.

Celebrate Success

It was a successful summer! We call out several items for celebration.

1. We hosted our highest visitation rate, with a full Gothic population through much of the summer along with active shoulder seasons in the fall and spring. We accomplished this because of your flexibility and a great staff that working tirelessly and with ingenuity in planning. That was a lot of science this summer!

2. After two years of covid operations, continued local and national staffing challenges, and food price inflation, the Dining Hall returned to a more traditional fashion. Food is one of the great community building elements, and seeing people together at the bbcc, inside and outside, was refreshing. Community seminars after dinner on Tuesday returned, which is another way we all come together. And the food was great!
3. With mental health needs increasing nationally, RMBL focused on providing support in a challenging environment for community members.
4. With SAIL, SPLASH, and other related projects, RMBL successfully integrated atmospheric research into its portfolio. While a relatively new type of research with an associated learning curve, we were able to effectively layer large instrumentation projects on existing projects. The always curious RMBL community welcomed the new science and their team members as important additions to the community.

Operational goals for 2023

Using your feedback, we have identified draft priorities below that we think will most cost effectively improve RMBL's operations. Implementation of the items below is contingent upon availability of funding and staff time, with the Board setting priorities through the 2023 budget.

1. Continue fire mitigation, including removal of trees, creation of defensible spaces, a movement away from the use of propane, and construction techniques that minimize ember fires. While we are sensitive to how fire mitigation may change the look and feel of parts of Gothic, these measures will significantly reduce potential disruption to research and education. Fire mitigation is one of the most cost-effective tools to ensure RMBL's resilience and sustainability.
2. Add functionality in the RMBL Community Portal for PIs and project managers to manage projects, such as reservations and billing information. We will create a single automated report for PIs to review and approve billing before official invoices are generated.
3. Create a comprehensive community calendar for all RMBL events with functionality including but not limited to searchability/filtering and management of access.
4. Move scheduling of more resources, such as conference rooms, other spaces, equipment, and bikes, to the Community Portal.
5. Open the bbcc as a 24-hour community space. The bbcc will be available after hours for informal and impromptu gatherings and as a safe space. Management policies and expectations for after-hours use will be developed and communicated.
6. Improve the shower house, including increasing hot water capacity, improving floor and wall finishes to make surfaces easier to clean and maintain, and adding additional outdoor washdown areas to discourage washing of other items. Given fundamental limitations to location and design for the existing facility, we are also exploring ways to replace the shower house with a new facility by Crystal Cabin.
7. Create resources and procedures to improve room/cabinmate experiences as well as general management of cabins. Resources may include expectation and chore checklists that will be made available to residents, more formal checkout procedures, and improved cabin orientation.

8. Improve infrastructure for bikes. We have not yet prioritized specific actions but items we are considering include weather protection, better signage, enhanced scheduling, and dedicated ebike infrastructure.
9. Improve shoulder and winter services. This fall we made improvements to Richards and Galena. We are making a new shower house a priority, though that will be at least several years off.

We are exploring options for improving the fall flow of traffic at the main East Gothic entrance, including the possible addition of a cattleguard. We will also look at possibilities to eventually run power across the road for vehicle charging stations in the East Gothic parking lot.

Trends and Challenges

RMBL & COVID-19: This was the third summer RMBL operated with the virus. After two summers without any residential cases in Gothic, we had 21 reported cases between May and October, reflecting the emergence of variants as well as changing expectations around risks. We reduced risks by requiring up-to-date covid vaccinations of Gothic residents, adjusting policies as the transmission environment changed, and increasing housing options (e.g. tents, Gunnison housing). We also empowered individuals to manage their own risk levels by improving transparency around community transmission and proactively informing individuals of RMBL's policies. For 2023 we will continue to evaluate the situation and communicate important updates with you via the website and the PI listserv.

Operating in a challenging economy: The labor market, inflation, and housing create challenges to operating RMBL and controlling costs, including hiring seasonal staff. While demand for Gothic housing continues to increase, our county land use permit limits summer occupancy to 180 residents. Crystal Cabin and the tents give us more flexibility, but do not increase capacity. While it is unfortunate that some individuals had to commute from Gunnison, the only alternatives were to provide those individuals with no housing or to displace other individuals. While we will continue to explore options, until we build housing through the Mt. CB expansion, we are unlikely to have sustained capacity to house more people in the north end of the valley.

Updates on long-term goals for operations

The strategic plan includes important long-term goals for operations. Here are some updates.

- **Deferred maintenance at Gothic.**
 - RMBL hired a year-round Facilities Manager, Benn Schmatz in the spring. Steve Jennison continues as RMBL's Director of Facilities and his focus will shift to planning and managing construction projects, including the Mt. Crested Butte campus. Benn's position will allow us to maintain strong support of Gothic facilities while we plan and implement North Village.
 - While we received funding from the NSF for a new, four-season cabin because of a challenging construction environment we have put the project on hold. We are exploring options with NSF, including shifting these funds to a new washhouse.
- **Expanding RMBL's data infrastructure**
 - RMBL's new cloud-based portal for administering research, submitting applications, and making reservations finished its second summer. Next steps include adding functionality for reservations and billing.

- RMBL offers data services including but not limited to drone imagery acquisition, data curation and archiving assistance, and support for spatial data analysis.
- Spatial data and other data products and datasets are found on the RMBL data catalog.
- **Improving navigation and information flows on the RMBL website.**
 - We continue to make improvements in response to community feedback, but our ability to make significant improvements is hampered by the age and design of the site. This winter we are evaluating what information should migrate to the portal.
- **Developing and realizing a sustainable financial model which adequately supports building, lab, equipment, and IT infrastructure for the RMBL community.**
 - We are quietly raising capital funds to support investments in Gothic, the North Village campus, RMBL's spatial ecology program, and data management. This year we received a \$2 million pledge to fund the purchase of land for an expansion in Mt. CB..
 - We are seeing increasing inflationary pressures on local housing costs, employee benefits, materials, food and costs for contractors to provide maintenance/repair services in Gothic. We plan to hold fee increases for 2023 to around 3-6% and to at least maintain fellowship support at 2022 levels. We recommend that you contact Kelly (kelly@rmbll.org) if you are working on grant budgets for 2023 or beyond to make sure you budget appropriately for RMBL expenses.

Progress report on goals set for 2022

In 2021 we set eleven primary goals. Below is a list of those goals and our progress this year.

1. **Update Remington Cabin.** The work to upgrade the Remington Cabin was postponed as we pivoted to other prioritized cabin improvements. The change in focus allowed us to take advantage of staff capacity during the winter and not disrupt the use of Remington Cabin during the busiest times of year. Attention was shifted to a major refresh of the Marcellina cabin (which is able to be easily heated during the winter), replacement of showers in many cabins, and an array of continued cabin improvements throughout the town site.
2. **Create streamlined communications for spring and fall operations, including updates on road status, available RMBL services, internet and water availability in Gothic, cow migrations, and other important news. We will look at developing a color-coded system to easily communicate the seasonal status of RMBL services.** We streamlined information through a link on the website that provided a single location for updates on opening and seasonal availability of services.
3. **Provide additional spaces for private communications. This could include private rooms with good communication equipment (Wi-Fi, IP phone) and space for a few people to meet.** We provided at least 7 different spaces.

- 4. Re-focusing on RMBL community interaction as we learn to live with COVID.** We brought back the Tuesday night scientific seminar series and supported other social events. Ruby Lounge was returned to a community meeting space after being used as a residence the last two years. In the fall we built a new community fire pit in a prominent location outside the bbcc to encourage inclusive interaction.
- 5. Increase the availability of well-functioning common use bikes in Gothic.** We increased the reservable bike fleet to four ebikes, four new pedal bikes, and three flatbed cargo trailers that can be towed behind the new bikes (which are especially helpful before the road is open to motorized traffic in the spring). We provided training for ebikes, which we will expand. The RMBL bike fleet (available without reservation) was evaluated by a professional bike mechanic and bikes that were deemed serviceable were repaired, tuned, and available to the community.
- 6. Improve communication within the undergraduate program.** We replaced the content management system with a new website and saw a drop in complaints.
- 7. Provide, in a user-friendly manner, required training on codes of conduct, behavioral expectations, and misconduct reporting for all RMBL residents.** All staff took required sexual misconduct and mandatory reporter training. A new code of conduct training module was developed in the RMBL Community Portal, which will become required in 2023. For the entire community RMBL hosted workshops designed for field settings, two on and two on microaggressions. We increased outreach efforts, available resources, and communications around inclusivity and conduct.
- 8. Improve the ability for community members to easily communicate their gender identities and pronouns when they wish.** These details can now be voluntarily added to user accounts in the RMBL Community Portal. This information was used on name tags for orientation, staff information, and for other activities when needed.
- 9. Based on the recommendations from a professional report, continue efforts on RMBL's fire mitigation program around the Gothic townsite.** Following recommendations, we limbed and removed problematic trees as well as vegetation close to buildings. We began applying recommended materials and techniques to new and upgraded infrastructure. To reduce unsafe use of fire pits while maintaining social interactions, in the fall we installed a new community safe fire pit.
- 10. We will again deploy a limited number of residential tents in the Gothic townsite to add additional housing capacity and flexibility.** We utilized eight canvas tents with tent platforms that had power. The large Weatherport housed 4 residents most of the summer. It was improved with new flooring and addition upgrades in the fall and will likely be managed as two separate rooms with fewer residents.
- 11. We will look at adding increased functionality and flexibility in managing dining reservations.** We decreased lead times to the day before (although we are still working on some time zone issues in the portal), increased flexibility in choosing meat and vegetarian meals, and added the ability to make group reservations. We returned to providing leftovers to the community when they were available.

Other ways you can provide feedback

While we strongly encourage participation in the annual online exit survey, we welcome your feedback at any time. We encourage you to give us your thoughts on pretty much anything, including items you think we have missed, feedback on how we have analyzed the information we received, or how we have prioritized our responses. You can contact Kelly, RMBL's Chief Operating Officer, at kelly@rmbll.org or (830) 358-3501 or Brett Biebuyck, RMBL's Director of Administration, at brett@rmbll.org or (970) 349- 7231 at any time throughout the year.

If you have any feedback that might have budgetary implications for 2023, please provide feedback no later than November 16 so we have time to consider that for the 2023 budget cycle.