

Correspondence



RABBIT CREEK COMMUNITY COUNCIL (RCCC) A Forum for Respectful Communication & Community Relations



1057 West Fireweed Lane, Suite 100 / Anchorage, AK 99503

Brian Elliott, Regional Environmental Manager
Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities
P.O. Box 196900
Anchorage, AK 99519-6900
Email: brian.elliott@alaska.gov

July 15, 2021

Dear Mr. Elliott:

The Rabbit Creek Community Council (RCCC) appreciates this opportunity to provide comments to the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (ADOT&PF) on the expanded scoping for the project formerly identified as Windy Corner MP 105 – 107, and now called MP 105-109.5, Windy Corner to Rainbow Point. These comments emphasize and are in addition to those submitted on June 5, 2021 and attached here for your reference.

The RCCC borders Chugach State Park (CSP) and many of our residents use the Turnagain Arm trail as well as the Seward Highway. As a result, we closely follow road projects and issues involving access to CSP in South Anchorage. We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the revised Environmental Assessment (EA) to include updated environmental analysis. These comments are in addition to those submitted by RCCC on June 5, 2021. They were discussed and approved at our noticed public monthly meeting on July 8th, 2021 by a vote of 11 yays, 3 nays, and 1 abstained. By submitting comments now, during agency scoping, we hope to ensure a broad scope for this project. We understand there will be, and anticipate participating in, future public comment periods.

1. **Highway speed and safety:** High speeds have been implicated in many of the accidents in the Turnagain Arm portions of the Seward Highway including, and perhaps especially, in areas where the road has been straightened and upgraded. The EA should evaluate if there is a correlation between the speed and accidents. It would be particularly helpful to have engineering and design studies that address this specific point included in the EA so they are available for public review and comment. The EA should also put forward and evaluate measures that could be taken to mitigate the risks associated with vehicle speeds and promote safety through this zone. We recommend that the revised EA analyze the role of speed in incidents of vehicle crashes through the project area, in particular since the project is being designed for a 65 miles-per-hour (mph) speed (FAQ dated 6/28/21).
2. **Material sites:** One of the key changes for summer 2021 outlined in the project Fact Sheet (June 2021) was that ADOT&PF would evaluate the feasibility of obtaining materials for the project from the new road alignment to reduce impacts to CSP (the previous draft EA (March 2020) proposed obtaining material from locations within CSP at MP 104 and 109). The residents of the community of Rainbow, which is located at MP 109, have suffered through 2.5 years of rock crushing during previous upgrades of the Seward Highway. The EA should include cumulative impacts to residents of Rainbow as result of continued use of the MP 109 gravel source in their updated EA and evaluate if another material source would result in fewer impacts.

3. **Recreation issues:** The RCCC recommends that improvements to trails and trailheads be analyzed in the EA and included in the proposed project for design and construction. The Notice of Intent (NOI) to Begin Engineering and Environmental Studies and Flood Plain Encroachment dated May 5, 2021 includes “consideration of a separated multi-use pathway connecting Windy Corner and Rainbow trailheads” and “design a separated pedestrian pathway and secure right-of-way between Windy Corner and Rainbow Trailheads adjacent to the northbound lane.” Other elements of the project are listed in the NOI as “design and construct.”

Several adopted plans support the multi-use trail from Potter to Girdwood, including the Chugach State Park Trail Management Plan, the CSP Access Plan, and the Anchorage 2020 Comprehensive Plan and Areawide Trails Plan. In addition, as result of federal funding used as part of this project, and in accordance with Executive Order 13195 – Trails for America in the 21st Century, ADOT&PF has an obligation to construct multi-modal facilities.

Furthermore, development of and improvements to trails and trailheads in the project area will assist in addressing the purpose and need outlined in the draft EA (2020) to implement safety upgrades and alleviate traffic congestion by providing better and safer access to trails. These popular recreational facilities get extensive use and the other improvements included in the proposed project will make them even more attractive by making access easier and safer (e.g., fewer traffic delays, designated parking and safe trail access). Therefore, RCCC recommends the following changes to the proposed project:

- The multi-use trail should be included as “design and construct.” If ADOT&PF is considering **not** constructing the identified multi-use trail, it should include justification of this decision as an exemption of the requirements of EO 13195 and the applicable plans identified above.
- The project area should be expanded approximately ¼ mile to the south to include the Falls Creek Trailhead pullout. We further recommend that improvements to this pullout be included in the proposed project and impacts (including benefits) evaluated in the EA.
- The scoping should specifically identify degradation to CSP resources as an impact, and evaluate mitigation options. The mitigation options should be developed in close consultation with CSP staff and the CSP Citizen Advisory Board. This highway project will have ongoing, significant impacts to the natural setting and the aesthetic and recreational values of the park. The detriments include the possible quarrying; the large fill footprint of the highway and parking areas; increased traffic speed, noise and visibility; possible reduced beluga whale activity near the shore; and increased maintenance costs and behavior management costs at the pullout. Therefore, the scoping should be expanded to include mitigation for impacts to CSP, including:
 - A. **Trail hardening.** Realign and sustainably construct the Turnagain Arm Trail adjoining the Windy Corner and Rainbow pullouts to handle the induced recreational use.
 - B. **Habitat protection.** Design and construct observation points or other visitor management structures adjoining the pullout, to deter erosion and encroachment of visitors into the sheep habitat.

- C. Reclamation. Re-contour and revegetate with native plants and trees any disturbed areas that are not suitable for recreation use, to deter nuisance behavior (such as camping and refuse dumping).
 - D. Funding for ongoing maintenance. CSP does not typically collect fees from transient users. CSP can ill-afford to operate a highway rest-stop and pay for toilet, plowing, and trash services for highway travelers. Funding sources for future maintenance of a Windy Corner pullout should be evaluated to ensure it does not become an unfunded maintenance burden for CSP. Logically, ADOTPF maintenance funding should be part of the solution.
- o Access to the shoreline could be included in the proposed project. This will provide an additional facility to accommodate public recreational needs, reducing the impacts on existing trailheads.

4. Beluga whale population. Local residents report regularly observing beluga whales feeding in the eddies along the project shoreline. We are concerned that the informal consultation included as Appendix D to the 2020 EA is dated, having been finalized October 28, 2015, and may not account for current information or include all the mitigation measures it should. Moreover, that EA involved a project with a footprint (length) much less than the current project. If not already underway, informal consultation should be reinitiated to update this information and ensure the expanded project will not adversely affect the endangered Cook Inlet beluga whale population or its designated critical habitat.

We appreciate your attention to these comments and recommendations and look forward to continuing our participation in this important community and State project.

Sincerely,



Ann Rappoport, Co-Chair
Rabbit Creek Community Council



Carl Johnson, Co-Chair
Rabbit Creek Community Council

Attachment

cc: Representative James Kaufman
 Senator Roger Holland
 John Weddleton, Assembly
 Suzanne LaFrance, Assembly
 Superintendent Ben Corwin, Chugach State Park
 Chair Ryan Yelle, Chugach State Park Citizen Advisory Board
 Bike Anchorage
 Piper Machamer, Chair, Turnagain Arm Community Council

Correspondence



RABBIT CREEK COMMUNITY COUNCIL (RCCC) A Forum for Respectful Communication & Community Relations



1057 West Fireweed Lane, Suite 100 / Anchorage, AK 99503

Brian Elliott, Regional Environmental Manager
Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities
P.O. Box 196900
Anchorage, AK 99519-6900
Email: brian.elliott@alaska.gov

June 5, 2021

Dear Mr. Elliott:

The Rabbit Creek Community Council (RCCC) appreciates this opportunity to provide comments on the expanded scoping for the project formerly identified as Windy Corner MP 105 – 107, and now called MP 105- 109.5, Windy Corner to Rainbow Point. We are pleased that project scoping has been expanded to extend the project further north to Rainbow Point, evaluate the feasibility of obtaining materials from outside Chugach State Park, and will consider a separated multi-use pathway connecting the popular Windy Corner and Rainbow trailheads.

The RCCC borders Chugach State Park; many of our residents use the Turnagain Arm trail as well as the Seward Highway. We closely follow road projects and issues involving access to Chugach State Park in South Anchorage. At a noticed public meeting on May 13, 2021, the RCCC voted to submit comments regarding this expanded scoping (18 yeas, 2 nays, 4 abstained). First, we are resubmitting the comments made in our August 14, 2020 letter to the Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities (ADOTPF) requesting several points of reconsideration and design revision (enclosed). Additionally, the RCCC voted to submit additional comments to take advantage of the expanded project scoping. By submitting comments now, during agency scoping, we hope to ensure a broad scope for this project. We understand there will be, and anticipate participating in, future public comment periods.

We believe these additional points discussed at our May 13, 2021 meeting support and expand on the extended scoping you have undertaken for this project:

1. The original Windy Corner project is a piecemeal approach to safety and access that is not cost-effective and may not be a priority compared to other needs along the Seward Highway corridor.

This expanded project north past Rainbow Point is more comprehensive. However, the eastern project terminus stops just 200 yards short of Falls Creek pullout, which draws increasing numbers of Chugach State Park visitors and is a turning hazard. This expanded project should include Falls Creek pullout, beginning at about MP 104.75.

2. The original project created rock quarries with Chugach State Park (Park) that are not allowed under Chugach State Park authorizing statutes, and that have greater adverse impacts than alternative materials sources.

We repeat the request to re-evaluate multiple materials sources other than Chugach State

Park; to put a monetary price on the Park materials; and also, to put a price on the loss in value of Park land and the future maintenance and management costs to Chugach State Park of abandoned quarries. The "free" cost of the Park quarries is deceptive. The lost value to the Park, and the disruption of quarrying on the Rainbow neighborhood and to traffic must be quantified. In addition, materials cost should not be the overriding factor on a project of this magnitude.

The expanded project should rule out quarrying. Quarrying for export outside of the Park (even to the adjoining highway) is not allowed under statute and sets a dangerous precedent. Evaluation of quarrying materials within the road right-of-way is worthy but inadequate.

3. The original design lacks both a multi-use separated pathway and a sufficient connection to the existing, adjacent Turnagain Arm Trail.

Failure to include the separated pathway would exacerbate the danger to cyclists in this stretch of roadway, because the new project will greatly increase turning and passing movements.

A separated multi-use pathway from Rainbow Point to Windy Corner would implement the long-standing intent of municipal plans and the Chugach State Park plan to extend a multi-use path from Potter Marsh to Girdwood. Therefore, the path should extend the entire length of this project, to bring us closer to those intentions.

The Turnagain Arm hiking trail that winds along the hillside will experience a surge in use when pullouts and trailheads are upgraded. The project should include mitigation funding for sustainable trails within the Park, with features that will deter nuisance behavior such as harassment of the Dall sheep.

4. The original project does not include safe turning lanes and may increase speeding-related crashes.

We re-iterate our concern that turning lanes need to be provided for both north and southbound traffic. We also have concerns about the design speed. We advocate features to ensure that this stretch of highway is not a high-speed passing zone with speeds that will be incompatible with safe turning. The distraction of sheep on the adjacent cliffs is not solved by building a pullout. If safety is truly the objective, this should be a safety zone, not a high-speed zone.

5. The original design does not fully account for impacts to wildlife, especially Dall sheep and beluga whales.

The new scoping does not address these issues. We re-iterate our earlier concerns. Specific to Dall sheep, wildlife biologists should consider how sheep movements will be affected, in terms of habitat loss, traffic impacts, and humans on foot. Beluga whale use of the natural shoreline merits further scrutiny.

6. The original design creates oversized and unfunded management costs for Chugach State Park. The quarries are unusable for recreation, and will attract nuisance behavior. The Windy Corner pull-out has an industrial-scale parking lot and a highway toilet stop that are not funded in the State Park budget. The adjoining Chugach State Park trails will experience

a surge in foot traffic. We recommend the following actions:

- *ADOTPF works with Chugach State Park staff, the Chugach State Park Citizen Advisory Board, and residents of Rainbow to determine the appropriate scale of parking, as well as upgrades to the adjoining trails to protect Park resources and Rainbow properties from highway and visitor impacts.*
- *The new scoping must calculate future maintenance and law enforcement costs for the abandoned quarries and the highway pull-out.*
- *There should be a determination of whether current parking passes can be used or Park visitor fees can be collected: if not, maintenance becomes an unfunded burden for Chugach State Park.*
- *Since the proposed Windy Corner pull-out will serve as a de facto highway rest stop, ADOTPF and Alaska Department of Natural Resources should negotiate future management and maintenance responsibilities and funding. Toilet and trash service for motorists should not become an unfunded mandate for Chugach State Park.*

We appreciate your attention to these comments and recommendations and look forward to continuing our participation in this important community and State project.

Sincerely,



Ann Rappoport, Co-Chair
Rabbit Creek Community Council



Carl Johnson, Co-Chair
Rabbit Creek Community Council

Enclosure

cc: Representative James Kaufman
Senator Roger Holland
John Weddleton, Assembly
Suzanne LaFrance, Assembly
Superintendent Ben Corwin, Chugach State Park
Chair Ryan Yelle, Chugach State Park Citizen Advisory Board
Bike Anchorage
Piper Machamer, Chair, Turnagain Arm Community Council