

Correspondence



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



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

Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities and
Safer Seward Highway
c/o HDR
582 E. 36th Ave. Suite 500
Anchorage, AK 99503

April 20, 2023

Dear Sean Baski, Chris Hughes, and Safer Seward Highway Project Management Team:

The Rabbit Creek Community Council (RCCC) greatly appreciates the opportunity to be involved in Project No. 0A31034/ Z566310000 Seward Highway MP 98.5 to 118 Bird Flats to Rabbit Creek, e.g., “Safer Seward Highway” (SSH) as a stakeholder. We attended an initial stakeholder meeting with you and the project team on March 9, 2023, and the subsequent Open House at Goldenview Middle School on March 23, 2023. Our Land Use & Transportation Committee has reviewed the current website and 2016 documents in the project library; we discussed what we know about this project at our April 13, 2023, RCCC meeting, and gathered additional community comments, questions, and concerns. We recognize that no alternatives have yet been proposed and you are in very preliminary stages of project design. However, given information from previous extensive studies throughout MP98.5 to 118, we have a number of comments and questions, as follows; these are organized in the categories requested on the project website.

Purpose and need: Do you have suggestions for additional needs?

Note - **Bold** is the current Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (ADOT) language. *Italics* show suggested amendments and questions that should be debated and answered in subsequent project phases.

1. **Improve safety** *for all users by managing speeds and crossflows.*
 - a. **Correcting roadway deficiencies.** *What design standards is ADOT proposing? Alaska, and Turnagain Arm in particular, likely does not have a one-size-fits-all situation in terms of speed and road configuration. In other states, interstates that pass through rural communities or sensitive environments sometimes revert to highway standards with safer speeds and some level of direct access for those highway sections.*
 - b. **Reduce congestion.** *Replace with: Reduce or minimize road closures.*
 - i. *It is cost-inefficient to build for peak use: the data does not show that peak holiday congestion is serious. See Bird traffic data from July 1, 2022.*

- ii. *Identify the causes and frequencies of congestion. Anecdotally, congestion is caused by crashes and closures, not necessarily under-capacity for vehicles. Design to reduce crashes, not accommodate peak traffic.*
- iii. *Consider maintenance costs. If a four-lane divided highway is built, is it necessary to plow all four lanes in winter?*
- c. *Preserve the high scenic values and recreation access to Potter Marsh, Chugach State Park, and Turnagain Arm.*
- d. *Incorporate local communities' priorities for balancing local access with through traffic.*

Alternatives: Do you have any suggestions for improvements? Other ideas we should look at?

- 2. Alternatives (as presented in the Project Library, 2017 Route Development Plan)
 - a. ADOT's proposed re-positioning of the highway on the seaward side of the Railroad tracks at Potter Marsh, dubbed "Potter Flats."
 - i. Positives: it reduces fill and roadkill along the marsh.
 - ii. Negatives: huge amount of fill, and vulnerability to earthquakes.
 - iii. Another option - Could the railroad (RR) be moved farther out, and two more lanes be added in the current RR location?
 - iv. Do not make the new road too straight. It should be designed to avoid an invitation for excess speed. *What design elements will deter excess speeds? Avoid building a "Potter Flats" drag way.*
 - v. Minimize noise and lighting impacts on marsh resources: no soaring lights, and position new road lanes close to RR. This is a State Critical Habitat Area and part of the state's Anchorage Coastal Wildlife Refuge.
 - vi. Preserve views – no fence along tide flats.
 - vii. Create a RR alignment that will accommodate passenger rail to Girdwood. This will reduce traffic demand/parking demand in Girdwood.
 - b. DOT's proposed new Rabbit Creek Road interchange.
 - i. Would condemn two residences.
 - ii. The new T intersection would back up traffic on Rabbit Creek Road.
 - iii. Expands the footprint and impacts of the highway into the marsh & neighborhood.
 - iv. The shooting range access road at this interchange does not appear to have a good line of sight, and seems to have a huge footprint that takes two houses for access to an area that would not appear to have high levels of use and is open limited hours. Moreover, it is likely to increase the noise for the north Potter Marsh visitor site and boardwalk where thousands of people gather to watch birds.
 - c. DOT's proposed designation of the existing Seward Highway as a frontage road.
 - i. Re-design and re-name it as a parkway.
 - ii. Design it for self-implemented moderate speeds. Intermittent median of non-forage trees to create a one-lane divided feel, like 36th at the University, or Kincaid Park entrance.
 - iii. Add multiple pull-outs to enhance visitor opportunities for Potter Marsh.

- d. DOT's proposed lack of an interchange at Potter Valley Road.
 - i. Requires Potter Valley residents to drive several miles north in order to access the Seward Highway going south.
 - ii. Consider a one-way exit ramp for northbound highway users to turn onto Potter Valley Road. This would mitigate the out-of-direction travel for Potter Valley Road and south Potter residents.
 - iii. Note – this area was designated a “Special Study Area” in the 2010 Hillside District Plan (Map 4.1, pg. 103).
- e. Old Seward Highway on the east side of Potter Marsh.
 - i. Re-design as a recreation corridor with very low-speed, low-volume of traffic between Tideview Drive and Potter Valley Road (see the Hillside District Plan, pg. 4-8).
 - ii. Keep small footprint of roadway.
 - iii. Possibly convert one lane to pedestrian multi-use path. Retain a one-way vehicle lane from Potter Valley Road to Tideview Drive.
- f. Turnagain trailhead access.
 - i. Include a separated pathway from Turnagain Trailhead to South Potter Marsh Pullout.
 - ii. The proposed highway overpass will block views and create a high level of noise at the trailhead. How will this be mitigated? Can there be a highway underpass under the railroad, instead of over it?
- g. McHugh Creek access.
 - i. What intersections are proposed?
 - ii. If there is a frontage road and turn lanes, will that displace the lower parking, which is needed in winter? Do not reduce parking at the base of the steep hill.
 - iii. Effect on the tidal pool at the road entrance?
- h. Rainbow
 - i. What intersections are proposed?
 - ii. What would happen to Rainbow Scenic Overlook?
- i. Indian and Bird.
 - i. Similar to above, what intersections are proposed?
- j. Other trailheads.
 - i. What will the access be to the numerous roadside pullouts? For both rock climbing on the inland side and coastal access on the seaward side?
- k. Beluga point: need easy access from both directions of the highway.
- l. Turnagain Arm tidal access.
 - i. The Highway should not close off all access to the tidal flats. The public needs recreational access for photography, kiteboarding, parasailing, and scenic enjoyment.

Issues: Do you have any issues we should study?

3. Other issues the Environmental Assessment should study:
 - a. Data on speed and safety for currently improved highway segments.
 - b. Use the railroad to haul materials for construction. Construction will be a traveler's nightmare.
 - c. Import of materials must be included in the project costs. Do NOT remove large promontories such as Rainbow Point to obtain local materials. Chugach State Park is not a quarry.
 - d. Consider tunneling.
 - e. Rather than a four-lane highway, consider three lanes with alternate passing lanes.
 - f. Reliability during extreme weather events – very high winds are common, and winter freeze-thaw cycles are more common.
 - g. How will the design mitigate climate change heat extremes? Are there high-albedo construction materials?
 - h. How can design, construction and maintenance reduce the impacts on wildlife habitat, especially given the stresses of climate change? Also recognize that this habitat is a draw for the highway, e.g., sheep viewing, and thus has an economic value in tourism.
 - i. Coordinate with the Rabbit Creek Road Rehabilitation and Old Seward Highway Pavement Replacement projects to ensure that neither foreclose options, are negated, or require expensive re-dos relative to the SSH project.

Again, thank you for this early opportunity to present our comments and questions. We look forward to further information and discussions with you regarding the SSH Project.

Sincerely,



Ann Rappoport, Co-chair



John Riley, Co-chair

cc: Brian Elliott, ADOT Project Manager
Sean Baski, ADOT Project Design
Suzanne LaFrance, Anchorage Assembly
Randy Sulte, Anchorage Assembly
Zac Johnson, Anchorage Assembly
Cathy Giessel, State Senator
Laddie Shaw, State Representative