

ALASKA LEGISLATURE

Representative Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins

Sponsor Statement | HB 82 Off-Highway Driver's Licenses

Currently, 294 off-road Alaskan communities are eligible for off-highway restricted driver's licenses (OHDs). OHDs are licenses that are important to rural residents: they don't require a photo or a road test, so you can get them through the mail. For communities that do not have DMV offices, having access to OHDs means you don't need a five day trip, five hundred dollars, and a road test in an unfamiliar community to get legally licensed to drive at home.

But, due to a regulation change in 2014, the current eligibility requirements no longer match the intent of the off-highway program, and need to be reformed.

Before 2014, residents had to be unconnected to the road system, with no access to road testing through a DMV office. These criteria make sense. But in 2014, an additional requirement was added: if any community had any segment of road with an average daily traffic count of more than 499 (the Department of Transportation's estimate of how many times any road is driven over during any given day), that community's residents were ineligible for OHDs.

This doesn't make sense: traffic count is an arbitrary metric. Communities either have access to a DMV office, and can easily get regular licenses, or they don't, and should qualify for off-highway licenses. Traffic count is irrelevant, and can change year to year, so off-highway communities are always at risk of getting their eligibility revoked. Angoon, Kake, and Hoonah, who enjoyed several decades of eligibility, were told that their communities no longer qualified as off-highway — which came as a surprise to residents.

In addition to the traffic count problem, the policies about whether a rural community connected to the road system by the Alaska Marine Highway counted as true "access" to a DMV office was being enforced inconsistently. Some ferry accessible communities remained eligible: some were told that ferry access disqualified them.

HB 82 would reform the eligibility guidelines for off-highway driver's license program. It clarifies the issue of ferry access, and removes arbitrary traffic count requirements. It would return to the common sense eligibility requirement that worked for decades: if a community is not connected to the terrestrial road system, and they don't have a DMV, they qualify for off-highway licenses. The bill would re-add Kake, Hoonah, Angoon, Hyder, and Seldovia to the list of eligible communities, and safeguard other communities from being kicked off the list.