



Re: HB 72

March 31, 2015

Senate Finance Committee

Dear Finance Committee Members:

We ask you to think for a minute about what a road into your community does for you. It is something that many have never even pondered. . . until a disaster blocks that road. Transportation is so intrinsic to our modern way of life that most take it for granted. That is, unless you are served by the Alaska Marine Highway. We love our highway as do the many visitors who seek to travel to Alaska on our ferry system. Indeed, our community has grown and thrived since the introduction of the AMHS in the early sixties. Unfortunately, this summer we will experience the lowest level of service since the inception of the system in 1965, when only two vessels serviced this area.

Like you, we understand the depths of the budget crisis; and our community is and will be dealing with it across all community sectors. However, we are being asked to accept a level of AMHS service that is similar to steamship days, even before the beginning of the system. With one of the highest level of General Fund Appropriations and the largest fleet size since the inception of the system, we have to question, "Why, is this necessary?" For years we have commented and questioned the wisdom of various DOT proposals for vessels and transportation plans. Southeast Conference was even formed to deal with our transportation issues. Despite our input and that of other Southeast communities, our comments have been largely ignored for decades.

We need a transportation system that functions effectively for all communities. The only way to rebuild our marine highway and reduce the outsized General Fund Appropriation is to return the planning and direction of the system to your constituents--the customers of the Alaska Marine Highway. We might not be able to do much better, but could we do much worse?

Imagine that the road into your community has been blocked by a landside and DOT must conduct studies before it reopens. Then, since the road is closed, lack of system use becomes the justification for further reducing service. This is the crux of our situation in Southeast, which will have a continued effect of limiting business operations, eliminating student educational opportunities, preventing tourists from making rational and predictable travel plans, keep residents from visiting nearby communities for medical access, shopping and to stay in touch with families, for just a few examples. Help us open our blocked highway by managing the AMHS in a different way. Transportation is the indisputably vital link connecting communities and opportunities. Further reductions in AMHS operations will affect our community negatively for decades to come.

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We thank you for the opportunity to comment, and urge you to reconsider the AMHS budget and operations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dave Kensinger', written over a horizontal line.

Dave Kensinger, Vice-President

Petersburg Chamber of Commerce