



Anchorage

SECTIONS

Railroad eyes commuter service between Wasilla and Anchorage

Zaz Hollander | February 11, 2014

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Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News

The Alaska Railroad is evaluating whether to launch weekday passenger rail service between Anchorage and the Valley, where nearly a third of the working population drives to jobs in Alaska's largest city.

Trains would run from Wasilla to the railroad's Ship Creek platform in Anchorage and back.

But don't line up for tickets just yet.

Officials want to make sure the public understands that any plans are in the early stages. Any new train service would need approval from the railroad's board of directors, already grappling with a difficult budget year. Many details have yet to be worked out, including fare and schedule.

At least this hypothetical train has a name: the Wasilla Turn.

"We're very preliminary here," said Jim Kubitz, the railroad's vice president of corporate planning and real estate. "But it's the right thing to do, to figure it out. We're owned by the state. We need to be able to offer alternatives."

There will be a briefing for the railroad policy makers and the public at a board meeting at 9 a.m. Feb. 27 at Alaska Railroad Headquarters on Ship Creek Avenue.

If approved, service between Wasilla and Anchorage could start on a three-year, trial basis in mid-September, Kubitz said this week.

Here's "the concept" he's rolling out:

Two morning trains from Wasilla, probably three 160-passenger cars each, maybe 45 minutes apart. Two afternoon or evening trains from Anchorage. Fares in the range of \$10 or \$12 for a round trip, or half that one-way. Passengers would use platforms at the new Wasilla hub and the Ship Creek freight shed in Anchorage.

It's possible trains could also stop near Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson.

Trains would run five days a week, weekdays only, from September through May. There would be no service in summer, when tourists and cruise ship passengers fill the passenger cars.

Given years of fruitless talk about commuter rail here, Valley residents tend to be wary of good news on the subject.

Studies of commuter trains between Anchorage and the Valley date back decades. A \$2.3 million train station complete with heated bathrooms opened in 2004 at the Alaska State Fairgrounds in Palmer, raising new hopes for passenger service that never materialized.

So why now?

Railroad spokesman Tim Sullivan credited increased interest from community leaders and commuters coupled with the railroad's recent purchase of a track-side building in Wasilla -- the old Kenai Supply warehouse along the Parks Highway.

Thirty percent of workers in the Mat-Su Borough brave the brake lights and snarl-inducing accidents of the Glenn Highway for Anchorage. About 860 people participate in van pools through Anchorage Share-A-Ride and an unknown number take Valley Mover buses.

The possibility of Wasilla service first surfaced publicly at a joint meeting of the Anchorage and Mat-Su assemblies on Jan. 31.

"It's just kind of been speculation -- what if," said Mat-Su planning chief Eileen Probasco, who moved to Palmer in 1971. "This is the first time I'm really seeing it as a possibility. The fact it's a trial for a few years, that's probably the best way to approach it, see how it goes."

The borough is putting together a survey to gauge demand for a train, Probasco said.

Officials from Palmer and Wasilla say both cities want to be involved in any future conversations with the railroad.

During an interview this week, Kubitz several times repeated the idea that Wasilla service is evolving and still needs financial backing from the railroad's seven-member board.

The board, already expecting financial problems this year, now has to weigh any additional costs against further reductions in freight traffic linked to the recently announced shutdown of the Flint Hills Refinery.

After three years, it would be up to a regional transportation authority or some other entity to shoulder the costs.

Kubitz said there's no way passenger fares will defray much of the cost of running the Wasilla line so the railroad will essentially subsidize it.

"After three years we'll have a handle on costs but that's it," he said. "We're out of business unless someone can figure how to fund the difference."

If approved, the route would join existing passenger service between Anchorage and Fairbanks, and between Talkeetna and Hurricane.

The railroad gets about \$27 million a year for regularly scheduled passenger service from the Federal Transit Administration. Most of that money goes to pay off bond debt for accelerated track repair and other capital improvements, Sullivan said.

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