



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR BILL WALKER

**Department of Military and
Veterans' Affairs**

Office of the Commissioner

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April 3, 2017

The Honorable Chris Tuck, Chair
House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs
Alaska House of Representatives
204 Alaska State Capitol
Juneau, AK 99801

Dear Representative Tuck:

The Alaska Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs (DMVA) supports efforts to foster widespread public recognition of our veterans, including naming of roads, bridges, and other public infrastructure for noteworthy veterans, as contemplated by HB 178, which will be heard tomorrow in your committee. For example, the northbound Glenn Highway bridge over the Knik River is named for Medal of Honor recipient U.S. Marine Corps SSgt James Bondsteel. Thousands of motorists a day pass the sign recognizing Staff Sergeant Bondsteel and are reminded of his service and, by extension, that of all who serve in the United States military. In a state with 74,000 veterans and twice that number of dependents, such reminders are important in maintaining the public awareness of veterans' sacrifices, and of our State's and our Nation's ongoing commitments to those veterans. We fully support the spirit of this legislation.

The Department has a number of concerns about the precise mechanisms by which this recognition would be bestowed, and would like to bring them to the committee's attention. Should this bill become law, we'd like to be able to implement it as the Legislature intends, and in a cost-effective manner. Clearing up several ambiguities in the bill as written would enable us to accomplish that more effectively.

1. To begin with, the bill does not specifically define the "veterans' organizations" empowered to nominate potential honorees. It is unclear if an organization must be, for example, a 501(c)(19) charitable group, or a similarly formally recognized organization, or if it can be as informal as a few people calling themselves "Friends of" a particular veteran. Additionally, the bill does not specify if any veterans' organization, even one from outside of Alaska, may nominate a veteran for recognition along an Alaska road or over an Alaska bridge.

2. HB 178 does not specify what information the Department should collect and share with the Alaska State Legislature each year as part of its mandatory annual report on veteran nominations. As a start, the Department could provide details on date of nomination, the nominee's name and brief military experience, the nominating person(s) or organization, and the approximate location for recognition signage to be emplaced. If passed, we look forward to working with you on these specifics to ensure we meet the Legislature's intent.

The bill does not describe the level of due diligence the Legislature expects from the Department as far as documenting a nominee's service record, but we assume the body expects to rely on this Department's confirmation of each nominee's records and accomplishments. Again, it would be helpful to know more precisely what the Legislature would like to see in the Department's annual report.

For dedication of federal facilities, several different agencies have published formal regulations. If the Legislature would like the Department to develop similar regulations, it would be helpful to know, as precisely as possible, what the body expects would be included in such guidelines.

3. As written, the bill restricts road and bridge dedications to those veterans who served in and were honorably discharged from one or more of the uniformed services. HB 178 does not indicate whether an individual's conduct after being discharged would affect his/her eligibility for recognition under this bill. For example, the bill does not indicate whether a person honorably discharged, but later convicted of a criminal offense, would remain eligible for road or bridge naming recognition. If the Legislature is indeed interested in reviewing such information, it would be very helpful if the bill were to specify whose responsibility it would be to discover and report it.

4. There are many grades of infrastructure in the state, but HB 178 does not define "road" and "bridge." It would be helpful for nominating entities to know precisely which roads and bridges were available for naming.

5. HB 178 does not specify if a road or bridge may be named for more than one veteran.

6. As written, the bill apparently allows a section of road or a bridge to be named for any veteran, regardless of that veteran's state of residence or service (or lack thereof) in Alaska. The Department would like to know if it is to consider nominations of any veterans or those of Alaska veterans only. If the latter, the Department would like to know if it is to consider veterans who served with Alaska-based units of the uniformed services, Alaska residents or former Alaska residents who served with any unit, veterans of out-of-state units who are now Alaska residents, or some combination of these populations.

7. The Department would like to know if the Legislature would be amenable to our meeting the requirement to accept gifts, donations, and grants by adding a "donate" button on our webpages, with funds going directly to a designated account within the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities. Doing so would avoid the need for developing and implementing an administrative process, one which would likely prove disproportionately costly if naming nominations attracted a large number of small-amount donations.

8. HB 178 does not offer veterans or their families the opportunity to "opt out" if they do not desire the recognition for which veterans are nominated.

9. As written, the bill appears to preclude DOT&PF from posting or maintaining any sign or any marker, anywhere in the state, unless necessary funds are provided by veterans or veterans' supporters. If this is not what the Legislature intends, we recommend more precise language be included. Also, HB 178 appears to prohibit the State of Alaska from unilaterally honoring a veteran by naming a section of road or a bridge without first securing a nomination for such recognition

from a “veterans’ organization.” The Department would like to know if the Legislature contemplates accommodating other avenues of nomination of veteran honorees.

10. HB 178 appears to prohibit naming of roads or bridges for veterans who cannot – or whose families cannot – or who do not enjoy outside financial support to – pay for signage and maintenance, even if their accomplishments are widely recognized as worthy of recognition. The Department would like to know if the Legislature intends to provide a mechanism whereby such recognition could proceed. Further, the Department is concerned restricting recognition to veterans capable of generating financial support unfairly shifts public recognition through naming of public properties away from individuals who have shown exemplary service and/or have accomplished noteworthy achievements and toward only those with economic resources or who benefit from the economic resources of friends and supporters.

11. The bill defines veterans as persons who were honorably discharged from the uniformed services, i.e., the United States Army, United States Marine Corps, United States Navy, United States Air Force, United States Coast Guard, United States Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Commissioned Officer Corps. This implies the bill prevents naming of roads or bridges for National Guard veterans. If this is indeed so, the Department is concerned worthy Alaskans may be rendered ineligible for recognition offered to other veterans.

12. Under this bill, veterans with notable accomplishments who, for any number of relatively benign reasons, received general but not dishonorable discharges from military service are ineligible for recognition. The Department suspects a number of veterans who received general (under honorable conditions) discharges from military service would be otherwise appropriately qualified for public recognition, but the bill would unfairly exclude them.

13. The Department would like to know if the Legislature contemplates how to respond if, in the future, signs were damaged or vandalized, or supporters who originally provided funds for signage and maintenance ceased to provide funding for ongoing maintenance of signs. It would be helpful to know if the Legislature expects either this Department or DOT&PF to repair, replace, or remove signs in such circumstances, or to assume maintenance costs for signs no longer supported by gifts, donations, or grants.

We hope our observations are helpful as you continue reviewing this legislation. If you or your committee Members have questions of us or need more information, we stand ready to assist. Thank you for your dedication to Alaska’s veterans.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robert A.K. Doehl".

Robert A.K. Doehl
Deputy Commissioner