

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE TRANSPORTATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 27, 2003

1:32 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Jim Holm, Co-Chair
Representative Beverly Masek, Co-Chair
Representative Hugh Fate
Representative Cheryll Heinze
Representative Vic Kohring
Representative Albert Kookesh

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Mary Kapsner

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

CONFIRMATION HEARING

Commissioner, Department of Transportation & Public Facilities

Mike Barton - Juneau

CONFIRMATION(S) ADVANCED

PREVIOUS ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

MIKE BARTON, Commissioner

Department of Transportation & Public Facilities (DOT&PF)

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified as appointed commissioner of the Department of Transportation & Public Facilities.

ACTION NARRATIVE

TAPE 03-5, SIDE A

Number 0001

CO-CHAIR BEVERLY MASEK called the House Transportation Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:32 p.m. Representatives Masek,

Holm, Kohring, and Heinze were present at the call to order. Representatives Fate and Kookesh arrived as the meeting was in progress.

CONFIRMATION HEARING

Commissioner, Department of Transportation & Public Facilities

CO-CHAIR MASEK announced that the committee would consider the confirmation of the appointment of Mike Barton as commissioner of the Department of Transportation & Public Facilities.

Number 0092

MIKE BARTON, Commissioner, Department of Transportation & Public Facilities (DOT&PF), told the committee that he grew up in Illinois, went to school at the University of Michigan, served in the United States Army, worked for the U.S. Forest Service in northern Minnesota as well as in other parts of the country, and was working at national headquarters when he was asked if he was interested in relocating to Alaska. He said that it took him "about 10 seconds" to reply, because of his interest in Alaska. He relocated to Douglas Island in 1979, and there are now three generations of Alaskans in his family. His work as a regional forester included road building programs, and aircraft and boat operations. He served as commissioner of [DOT&PF] under then-Governor Hickel, and since that time has chaired the Juneau Airport Board.

Number 0232

CO-CHAIR MASEK asked why he changed from working in forestry to working in transportation.

COMMISSIONER BARTON replied that he had responded to Governor Hickel's request, and also told committee members that the correlation was that forestry work involved a road construction program, since roads in Southeast Alaska were constructed under the auspices of the U.S. Forest Service.

Number 0280

REPRESENTATIVE HEINZE asked how he felt about the closing of the [Division] of Agriculture under the Division of Natural Resources (DNR).

COMMISSIONER BARTON responded that, quite honestly, he wasn't aware of that situation and didn't have an opinion, as long as it wasn't going to be placed in [DOT&PF].

CO-CHAIR MASEK referenced the Alaska Division of Legislative Audit report to which Representative Heinze was referring, wherein it is recommended that the state delineate the position of Director of Agriculture. Co-Chair Masek also mentioned that at this point, there is uncertainty as to how the administration will proceed with that recommendation.

REPRESENTATIVE HEINZE said that she hoped that with Commissioner Barton's background, he would provide some input regarding the reorganization of the [Division] of Agriculture.

Number 0406

REPRESENTATIVE KOHRING asked what Commissioner Barton would like to accomplish during the next few years.

Number 0420

COMMISSIONER BARTON mentioned that he would like to see more construction of new roads rather than the reconstruction of old roads; the implementation of the fast-ferry concept; and a reduced reliance on the general fund for departmental activities - the fast ferries being one way to accomplish that within the marine highway system. Regarding aviation, he'd like to see the [Ted Stevens] Anchorage International Airport terminal finished, and would like to continue the program of lengthening runways and obtaining additional lighting for rural airports.

REPRESENTATIVE KOHRING asked if Commissioner Barton was in support of the Knik Arm Crossing project, and whether he considered it to be realistic.

COMMISSIONER BARTON responded that he certainly was supportive of the project and considered it to be a good investment in Alaska's future, but noted that it was an expensive project, and that its reality hinged upon finances.

REPRESENTATIVE KOHRING commended DOT&PF for jobs that have successfully accommodated growth within the state.

COMMISSIONER BARTON acknowledged that accommodating the rapid growth of the Matanuska-Susitna Valley ("Mat-Su") is a challenge that will need to be addressed.

CO-CHAIR MASEK asked what Commissioner Barton's position was on maintenance and operations, specifically pertaining to the winter months; she referenced operators who were removed from last year's payroll at the Willow Station.

COMMISSIONER BARTON responded that winter maintenance is fundamental for Alaskans, that he hoped that Governor Murkowski would continue to support winter maintenance, and that he was not expecting to be faced with choices [such as the previous occurrence at the Willow Station].

CO-CHAIR MASEK inquired about plans for the "Old Willow Maintenance Station."

COMMISSIONER BARTON confirmed that the current solution was temporary, that the station was on the list as a construction project, and that federal assistance had been requested.

CO-CHAIR MASEK referred to the management of the Willow Airport and asked if the airport could be kept open throughout the year.

COMMISSIONER BARTON said he was unfamiliar with the situation, and would look further into it.

Number 0728

CO-CHAIR HOLM asked what the commissioner's thoughts were regarding regional funding rather than use of the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) process. He also asked for input on the difference between center-line-mile adjustments and appropriations versus population appropriations.

COMMISSIONER BARTON responded that he intends to evaluate the merits of the STIP process. He said he doesn't know of anyone who is truly happy with that process, although it is a federal requirement for federal highway monies. He said that during the summer, the department will look at how the implementation of the STIP process might be improved upon.

CO-CHAIR HOLM agreed that the process could be improved upon, pointing out that one problem is that many different projects have been started and then, when monies are redirected, the process begins all over again. This is not cost-efficient and it is also very hard on the public - telling the public "no" would be handled easier than being given a carrot, he added. He referred to the Fairbanks Metropolitan Area Transportation Study

(FMATS) program and the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), and asked how funding would be handled.

Number 0905

COMMISSIONER BARTON said he looked forward to the implementation of the FMATS program because local people will have more control over the program. He mentioned that one of his staff, Jeff Ottesen, Statewide Planning Chief, was recently in Fairbanks to iron out issues pertaining to FMATS, and that the program would be implemented by May 1. He said the basic answer to the question is that operation will be very similar to the Anchorage Metropolitan Area Transportation Study (AMATS). He said DOT&PF has one seat on the board in Anchorage, and will have one seat on the board in Fairbanks, and local people will have more of a voice in the decision-making process.

CO-CHAIR HOLM commented that with the numbers being down from 36 percent to 6 percent in [President Bush's] budget, it "will be interesting to see how this plays out" regarding MPO funding; he asked if Commissioner Barton had "seen anything pertaining to this in the omnibus bill."

COMMISSIONER BARTON responded that he had not seen anything that would lead him to be alarmed.

CO-CHAIR HOLM asked, in light of the tremendous overruns at the [Ted Stevens] Anchorage International Airport, how future projects would be proposed and implemented.

COMMISSIONER BARTON acknowledged that the overrun at the airport had been caused by the security requirements resulting from [the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001] and from additional work needed to upgrade the seismic aspects of the airport's design. He said that sometime during the next two to three weeks there would be further discussion between the department and the legislature to address the airport overrun.

Number 1133

REPRESENTATIVE HEINZE asked the commissioner about building the road to Donlin Creek. She also asked why the roadwork done this past year near Talkeetna resulted in a road that was three lanes rather than four lanes.

COMMISSIONER BARTON responded that he didn't know why construction resulted in three lanes rather than four lanes.

Regarding the road to Donlin Creek, he said that \$4 billion was in the general obligation (GO) bond package for Donlin Creek. He said their best estimate of the cost of the entire road is about \$20 million, so they are working with Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority (AIDEA) to determine how to best utilize that \$4 million to build the road, and to possibly use it to leverage more money. He said that there are so many suggestions for roads of this type that creative means are needed to address the challenge for funding.

Number 1270

REPRESENTATIVE HEINZE asked how the road to Donlin Creek might rank if it were included on a list of 20 projects.

COMMISSIONER BARTON, in response to Co-Chair Masek's request to locate the Donlin Creek Road, described the location to the committee. He said it was east-northeast of Bethel, near Crooked Creek, and referring to a map being circulated among committee members, noted that it was "number 8 on that map." He confirmed that the road goes from the Kuskokwim River to the Crooked Creek area.

CO-CHAIR MASEK said this was the area where Calista [Corporation] was working, and that more involvement with gold mining would ensue.

COMMISSIONER BARTON made a reference to Placer Dome, Inc.

REPRESENTATIVE HEINZE reiterated that this would open up the mining area.

COMMISSIONER BARTON responded to an earlier question, saying that one consideration in the prioritization of a project is how quickly a project needs to be built.

CO-CHAIR MASEK ascertained that there were no further questions, and thanked Commissioner Barton for his views on transportation issues facing Alaska.

COMMISSIONER BARTON commented that there was a need to "strike while the iron's hot" regarding the multitude of opportunities in the state.

REPRESENTATIVE FATE then inquired as to how much new construction was involved with the road to Donlin Creek.

COMMISSIONER BARTON replied that the total distance was about 12 miles.

Number 1440

CO-CHAIR MASEK said that the confirmation hearing on Commissioner Barton was finished, that the confirmation report would be signed by members, and that the name would then be presented to the full House and Senate for a [vote].

[Although no motion was made to advance the confirmation, the confirmation of Commissioner Mike Barton was treated as advanced from the House Transportation Standing Committee.]

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Transportation Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 1:57 p.m.