

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE TRANSPORTATION STANDING COMMITTEE

February 7, 2008

2:02 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Albert Kookesh, Chair
Senator John Cowdery, Vice Chair (via teleconference)
Senator Donald Olson
Senator Bill Wielechowski
Senator Gary Wilken

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 216

"An Act designating the Alaska Highway and portion of the Richardson Highway as the Purple Heart Trail."

MOVED CSSB 216(TRA) OUT OF COMMITTEE

SENATE BILL NO. 224

"An Act providing for and relating to the issuance of general obligation bonds for the purpose of paying the cost of state transportation projects; and providing for an effective date."

MOVED SB 224 OUT OF COMMITTEE

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 216

SHORT TITLE: PURPLE HEART TRAIL

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) ELLIS

01/16/08	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/4/08
01/16/08	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/16/08	(S)	TRA
02/07/08	(S)	TRA AT 2:00 PM BUTROVICH 205

BILL: SB 224

SHORT TITLE: G.O. BONDS FOR TRANSPORTATION PROJECTS

SPONSOR(s): RULES BY REQUEST OF THE GOVERNOR

01/16/08	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/16/08	(S)	TRA, FIN

01/31/08 (S) TRA AT 1:00 PM BUTROVICH 205
01/31/08 (S) -- MEETING CANCELED --
02/07/08 (S) TRA AT 2:00 PM BUTROVICH 205

WITNESS REGISTER

SENATOR JOHNNY ELLIS
Alaska State Capitol
Juneau, AK 99801-1182
POSITION STATEMENT: Sponsor of SB 216.

JESSE CROSS-CALL, Staff
Senator Ellis
Alaska State Capitol
Juneau, AK
POSITION STATEMENT: Presented overview of SB 216.

REPRESENTATIVE BERTA GARDNER
Alaska State Capitol
Juneau, AK 99801-1182
POSITION STATEMENT: Sponsor of SB 216.

RON SIEBELS, Chapter Commander
Chapter 593 Military Order of the Purple Heart
Anchorage, AK
POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 216.

FRANK RICHARDS, Deputy Commissioner
Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT)
Juneau, AK
POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions about SB 224.

NANCY SLAGEL, Director
Division of Administrative Services
Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT)
Juneau, AK
POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions about SB 224.

ED LEON, Director of Finance
Port of Anchorage
Anchorage, AK
POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions about Port of Anchorage.

AVES THOMPSON, Executive Director
Alaska Trucking Association
Anchorage, AK
POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 224.

JAMES KING, Director
Division of Outdoor Parks and Recreation,
Department of Natural Resources
Anchorage, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered question about SB 224.

ACTION NARRATIVE

CHAIR ALBERT KOOKESH called the Senate Transportation Standing Committee meeting to order at [2:02:34 PM](#). Present at the call to order were Senators Wilken, Olson, Cowdery - via teleconference, Wielechowski and Kookesh.

SB 216-PURPLE HEART TRAIL

CHAIR KOOKESH announced consideration of SB 216.

[2:03:23 PM](#)

SENATOR ELLIS, sponsor, presented an overview of SB 216, which creates the Purple Heart Trail, a portion of the Alaska and Richardson Highways. This bill would join other states honoring recipients of the Purple Heart, a distinguished decoration for military men and women who have served and sacrificed for their country. Senator Ellis said he comes from a military family and his father served in Vietnam. The project was brought to his attention by Ron Siebels, a distinguished veteran and constituent. Mr. Siebels approached Rep. Berta Gardner, sponsor of the House legislation while Senator Ellis presents it in Senate. The Department of Transportation (DOT) has been cooperative and reasonable in the costs of the project. He said he looks forward to honoring recipients in this public way.

JESSE CROSS-CALL, staff to Senator Ellis, said he wanted to make sure the committee was aware of the proposed committee substitute which clarifies the size and location of the signage proposed by DOT.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI moved to adopt the proposed committee substitute (CS) for SB 216, labeled 25-LS1280, Kane, Version C, as the working document of the committee. There being no objection, Version C was before the committee.

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SENATOR WILKEN asked if there was a fiscal note.

CHAIR KOOKESH said the attached fiscal note is \$150,000, which includes an installation of six major signs, six minor signs, and three informational kiosks along the Richardson Highway for one year only.

[2:07:32 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BERTA GARDNER, Alaska State Legislature, said the bill is part of a national movement to designate a small portion of highway in every state to honor recipients of the Purple Heart, soldiers who have been injured or killed in the line of duty. It's very appropriate for Alaska with a force of thousands of men and women. The section of highway selected was originally built by the military.

RON SIEBELS, Chapter Commander, Chapter 593 Military Order of the Purple Heart, Anchorage, AK, said he'd like to thank everyone for their support. Many who travel the Purple Heart Trail will know or be related to a wounded veteran. He said this can be the visual proof that the state cares and helps to remember purple hearts veterans. He said he doesn't want Alaska to be the last state to pass this legislation. There are 43 states and Guam in support of it.

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SENATOR COWDERY joined the meeting online.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI moved to report CSSB 216(TRA), referred to as Version C, from committee with individual recommendations and accompanying fiscal notes. Hearing no objection, CSSB 216(TRA) passed out of committee.

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CHAIR KOOKESH called an at ease while the bill was signed.

SB 224-G.O. BONDS FOR TRANSPORTATION PROJECTS

[2:13:02 PM](#)

CHAIR KOOKESH announced consideration of SB 224.

FRANK RICHARDS, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT), presented an overview of the projects addressed in SB 224, defining the needs and benefits of each of the projects. The projects are spread out geographically across the state and address four primary goals of the department: increase safety; promote economic development; reduce congestion; and preserve existing assets. He said the first project is a congestion relief project, an

upgrade of the Dowling Road to four lanes from Old Seward Highway to Minnesota. It is part of a ten-year congestion relief project funded by state, federal and local funds. Past funding for the "Connect Anchorage" projects were included in the 2002 bond package. This portion of the Dowling Road is in the center of the Anchorage bowl, which currently lacks east/west corridors. This will relieve congestion in the heart of the city. The upgrade of this road will divert approximately 23,000 vehicles per day. The focus of the project has three of the top 12 accident locations in Anchorage.

The second project is an economic development project that will augment a city of Anchorage project looking at the alignment into the university medical district school. DOT estimates that traffic growth will continue.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked what DOT will do there.

MR. RICHARDS said the connection would provide a north/south route in the area where Northern Lights Boulevard runs east/west and Elmore Road runs north/south.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI said that's been very controversial and asked if it's been approved by the Anchorage assembly and local community councils.

MR. RICHARDS replied that Anchorage provided the initial funding for the study and this funding would augment that.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked if this is only a study or if it will be actual road construction.

MR. RICHARDS replied that this is a study.

SENATOR COWDERY asked what process was used to determine what would be on the list.

MR. RICHARDS replied that the department created a list of projects that were needed around the state and submitted it to the governor's office which then came up with the list.

SENATOR COWDERY said he noted there were funds included for the Port of Anchorage that the governor vetoed appropriations for last year and asked what has changed.

NANCY SLAGLE, Director, Division of Administrative Services, DOT, replied the Port Authority request is not part of the DOT

presentation today. She said Mr. Ed Leon may be online and able to answer those questions.

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ED LEON, Director of Finance, Port of Anchorage, said the port was not included in the DOT but is part of the Department of Commerce and Economic Development.

SENATOR COWDERY asked that since the port project was vetoed last year, what changed to include it this year.

MR. LEON said the port gave a slide presentation and tour to the governor. He said people have not been aware of the impact the Port of Anchorage has on the state. He said 75 percent of consumer goods that come to the state come through the Port of Anchorage. Most of the fuel and dry goods that go to the villages depart via barges.

SENATOR COWDERY said that most of the military ships go through there as well.

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MR. LEON confirmed that all deployments come through the Port of Anchorage. In 2004 there were four deployments; in 2005 there were six; in 2006, there were three; and last year, there were another three.

SENATOR COWDERY said he has supported this project for years.

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SENATOR OLSON joined the meeting.

MR. RICHARDSON said the university district has more employment than downtown Anchorage and they need a north/south connector. He said the university hopes to expand and ultimately create a town center and sports arena. The Northern Lights connection and University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) drive is one of Anchorage's top ten accident locations. He said by having the connection some of those accidents would be eliminated. The project has been part of Anchorage's long range transportation plan.

The Dalton Highway project is about economic development on the North Slope. The highway is the life line to the oil fields of Prudhoe Bay. This provides another \$14 million that will add an upgrade of 121 miles of road.

SENATOR WILKEN asked how this works with the original \$9 million commitment. He asked if it would be \$9 million plus \$14 million or would it be \$14 million one year and then back to \$9 million.

MR. RICHARDS replied that in the capital budget this year, there is \$5 million instead of \$9 million. This would augment the \$5 million if the bond package is passed. It will be an addition.

SENATOR WILKEN asked it that means there will be \$19 million for one year and then go back to \$9 million for another year or does that end the agreement of \$9 million for 5 years.

MR. RICHARDS said the goal is to continue with that funding level to be able to continue work on the Dalton Highway.

SENATOR OLSON asked if there's been any significant wear and tear on the highway from carrying by-pass mail up the road to Prudhoe Bay as opposed to flying it.

MR. RICHARDS said there has been increased traffic from mail and also from hauling fuel. The 18-wheelers do pound the surface.

SENATOR OLSON asked about the bridges, especially the one going across the Yukon River.

MR. RICHARDS replied they are improving the surface on that bridge and also fixing deep-fill culverts. He said he'd like to invite members of the committee on their annual trip up the Dalton Highway to show the legislature the benefits of this project. SENATOR WILKEN was one of the first members to join the outing, riding in the cab of an 18-wheeler.

CHAIR KOOKESH asked how long the trip is.

MR. RICHARDS replied that they do it as a day trip. They fly people to Prudhoe Bay, put them in truck cabs and drive, with a stop for lunch, to Jim River where a plane takes them back to Fairbanks and Anchorage.

SENATOR WILKEN said it's a remarkable trip.

MR. RICHARDS said it's a long 12-hour day and the department will probably do it again in June.

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The next project he spoke about was safety improvement, economic development, and quality of life issues in the Kenai Borough.

Project funds will be used to improve drainage, resurface deteriorated pavement and pave existing gravel roads. The DOT project will supplement borough funding.

Another project, the Snake River Bridge, is a vital link to Nome's city power plant, the port and the postal hub. All freight must cross this bridge. The bridge has structural issues but it's also a safety issue for aircraft. When large commercial trucks longer than fifteen feet are on the bridge, there's an airspace obstruction. The FAA has consistently cited the DOT for this issue and it's something that must be addressed.

CHAIR KOOKESH asked how this would be done.

MR. RICHARDS replied that the bridge would be moved to an alternate location away from the airspace and the old one would be removed. There's been damage from ice floes, and the abutment has deteriorated requiring the bridge to close frequently for repairs.

Another project the DOT hopes will reduce consumer costs in interior Alaska is to prevent damage from heavily loaded trucks. The current weight limit is 85 percent of legal loads. The damage is causing rutting and cracking, creating an unsafe surface. Pavement rehabilitation will bring the highway back to full structural strength. The damage of one 80,000-pound tractor trailer truck is equal to 10,000 passes of a vehicle. In the springtime there's thaw directly below the pavement and water is trapped because of the frozen layer beneath and the truckload on top. This creates an undulating surface which cracks the pavement. The DOT plans to bring in a non-frost susceptible embankment to prevent trapping water. The economic benefit is that truckers won't have to break down their loads to meet the legal requirement.

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SENATOR COWDERY asked about a study on the northern roads five years ago from the University of Alaska that determined the problem wasn't the size of the truck. The study determined that southbound lanes had more damage than northbound lanes and this was attributed to the bounce of the empty trailers.

MR. RICHARDS said he didn't know about the study and would look into it.

He spoke next about the Seward Highway Safety Project at Windy Corner. There is traffic congestion during the summer due to

wildlife viewing, specifically Dall sheep coming down to the road. The project will move both the railroad and the road to the west near Turnagain Arm. The revised highway will not affect the sheep habitat, but will provide off-highway viewing and parking so there won't be pedestrians on the Seward Highway. The Seward Highway now follows the contours of the mountain creating poor long-range visibility. Cutting into the cliff that creates the obstruction would adversely affect the sheep. Moving the road will require significant expense but is necessary to accommodate the safety needs of the highway. There have been eight fatalities in this two-mile section of road over the past 25 years. The legislature appropriated \$12 million in 2006 to construct passing lanes here, but escalating construction costs and consideration of the habitat requires the move to Turnagain Arm.

MR. RICHARDS said that pavements in Southeast Alaska are failing with stress cracking and major potholes. Another project will resurface and improve drainage along: 14 miles of Mitkof Highway in Petersburg, providing a link to the new terminal at Blind Slough as well as providing the only access to residential and recreational areas beyond Scow Bay; seven miles of the Craig/Klawock/Hollis Highway on Prince of Wales Island, the only road link between the two largest communities on the island; and the Glacier Highway in Juneau, from the Brotherhood Bridge to the ferry terminal.

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MR. RICHARDS said the Steese Highway/Johansen Expressway Project at a cost of \$15 million is a safety and congestion relief project. The DOT will improve intersections, add turn lanes, improve signs and signals, provide pedestrian facilities, and improve drainage, traffic flow, and circulation of the surrounding area. He indicated on a slide some of the worst congested intersections partly due to major box stores and new residential subdivisions.

SENATOR WILKEN asked if the \$15 million addresses each of the intersections identified on the slide.

MR. RICHARDS said he was not sure.

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AVES THOMPSON, Executive Director, Alaska Trucking Association, Anchorage, AK, said his organization is statewide representing more than 200 member companies from Barrow to Ketchikan. Freight movement represents a large chunk of the economy. "If you got

it, a truck brought it." Federal funding does not meet Alaska's transportation needs in the short or long term. This is an appropriate use of general fund dollars. ATA supports the DOT funded projects in this bill. Some projects have ATA priority: the Parks Highway weight restriction upgrade; the Dalton Highway improvements; the Anchorage projects; the Windy Corner on the Seward Highway; and the Steese/Johansen projects. ATA does not take a position on bonding versus general fund, but supports the projects identified in SB 224.

SENATOR COWDERY asked Mr. Aves if he remembers the study Senator Cowdery talked about earlier.

MR. AVES said he had only a vague recollection. He said when the truckers aren't able to carry full legal loads, the cost goes up and is borne by the shipper or the receiver. He said this bill should therefore be seen as a benefit to the consumer.

JAMES KING, Director, Division of Outdoor Parks and Recreation, Department of Natural Resources, said the project for a new visitor center represents an effort to provide more access to public lands and share the Denali experience with more Alaskans and visitors and to help build a more sustainable economy in the area.

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MR. KING said the plan is for a new visitor center complex in the south Denali area. He indicated on the slide the areas representing Denali National Park and Denali State Park as well as where the new complex is proposed. He showed a map indicating the Parks Highway and said the proposed center would be at milepost 134.5. He said the concept is to build a road from the Parks Highway up onto Curry Ridge. There would be a transportation center near the Parks Highway where buses and cars could be left near a transit system that would transport visitors. The \$8.9 million proposed in the bond package is for building those four miles of road to get people up to the ridge. The proposed center would provide accommodations for many different user groups. It is planned as a year-round facility unlike many of the visitor centers in the state which are closed in non-summer months.

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MR. KING said the design and construction would happen in the next three years. The federal government, through the national parks and Alaska's congressmen, has said that if the state starts the project, it will complete it. His division has

worked closely with the Matsu Borough, the park service and businesses to develop this project.

He has heard concern that this will compete for visitors to the national park and to Fairbanks, but he said this facility would only be a little over two hours from Anchorage versus a three-day excursion to the national park. It also will not provide the wildlife viewing opportunities to be had in the national park.

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SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked if this would be near Byers Lake.

MR. KING said no. He said Byers Lake is in the center of the park while this would be within three miles of the lower border of the park.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked if the \$20 million dollars expected from the federal government would be an earmark or if there are assurances from the National Park Service (NPS) that it will be included in their budget.

MR. KING said there's \$260 million in the Centennial Initiative through the National Park Service (NPS), a matching program for projects like this. The plan is to apply for the Centennial Initiative funds upon receipt of the \$8.9 million. The NPS thinks that at some point the Parks Highway will get too much traffic and see this center as an alternative. The NPS has added the project to their budget process. The project has also been earmarked by the congressional delegation and private businesses have offered funding support.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked if there is any opposition.

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MR. KING said that the original proposal, begun seven years ago, was in the Peters Hills area and very controversial among miners, snow machine users, skiers, "quiet rights" people and others. The park service talked with the opponents to determine what the real demand and need was. They conducted extensive studies and surveys. With the new location, he said the opposition has been replaced by support. It is better for the "quiet rights" people because visitors would not be getting as far into undisturbed areas. The environmentalists said this was a good opportunity to interpret the wilderness without detracting from it. The business community said it was within reach of existing facilities with land nearby that could be

developed to provide further support facilities. The miners and snow machine users also approved of the new location.

SENATOR WILKEN said as the Senator from Fairbanks he supports the project.

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SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI moved to report SB 224 from committee with individual recommendations and attached fiscal note(s). There being no objection, the motion carried.

There being no further business to come before the committee, CHAIR KOOKESH adjourned the meeting at [3:03:16 PM](#).