

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE TRANSPORTATION STANDING COMMITTEE

March 29, 2012

1:02 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Albert Kookesh, Chair
Senator Linda Menard
Senator Charlie Huggins

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Joe Thomas, Vice Chair
Senator Dennis Egan

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: PARKS HIGHWAY - WASILLA BYPASS

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

PAT KEMP, Deputy Director
Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF),
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented information related to the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass.

ROB CAMPBELL, Central Region Director
Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented information related to the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass.

JIM AMUNDSEN, Project Manager
Central Region Design/Engineering
Department of Transportation
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information related to the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass.

KENNETH RAY, representing himself
Fairview, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in favor of the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass.

DIANE WOODRUFF, representing herself
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass project.

ROGER PURCELL, representing himself
Houston, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified against the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass.

DALLAS MASSIE, Commander
American Legion Post
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified against the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass.

PAUL GARDNER, representing himself
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified against the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass.

BETH BASSNEY, representing herself
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified against the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass.

BETH FREAD, representing herself
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified against the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass.

ROBERT HALL, representing Mayor Thompson
Houston, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified against the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass.

TIM SWEZEY, representing himself
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified during the discussion of the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass.

BILL KRAMER, President

Big Lake Community Council
Big Lake, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in favor of the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass.

BERKLEY TILTON, Member
Knik Fairview Community Council
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified against the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass.

VERN RUPRIGHT, Mayor
City of Wasilla
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified on the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass.

ACTION NARRATIVE

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CHAIR ALBERT KOOKESH called the Senate Transportation Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:02 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Menard, Huggins, and Chair Kookesh.

Presentation: Parks Highway - Wasilla Bypass

CHAIR KOOKESH asked Senator Menard to provide introductory comments on the business before the committee, the Wasilla Bypass.

SENATOR MENARD related that she requested the hearing so that the Department of Transportation (DOT) can present its plan for the Parks Highway from Lucas Road to Big Lake Road to the Senate Transportation Committee. She noted that a petition with over 600 signatures has been circulating regarding this project.

CHAIR KOOKESH requested DOT to present their information on the project.

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PAT KEMP, Deputy Director, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF), introduced Rob Campbell.

ROB CAMPBELL, Central Region Director, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF), described the presentation format and noted that Jim Amundsen would speak on technical questions.

MR. CAMPBELL showed a map that depicted the project, which is located outside of Wasilla on the Parks Highway and is about 8 miles long. He said the primary focus of the presentation is on the first segment of the project. He addressed the purpose of the project, which is to move goods and services safely on a National Highway System (NHS) route, the Parks Highway. Currently, that purpose is not being met due to overcapacity. The goal is to address safety problems caused by uncontrolled access and congestion.

MR. CAMPBELL showed the proposed 4-lane divided highway with a center median that separates on-coming traffic. He said that one of the major causes of fatalities on the road now is head-on collisions. It is ranked number one for head-on crashes. He emphasized the need for a safety corridor on this section of the highway. He said the 4-lane divided highway was selected due to safety and efficiency advantages.

He continued to explain the goal of improving system efficiency. He talked about the disadvantages of 5-lane sections.

CHAIR KOOKESH asked what AADT means.

MR. CAMPBELL replied that it means average annual daily traffic.

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MR. CAMPBELL reported on the public involvement during the phases of the projects. He provided a brief synopsis of the meetings DOT has held on the project, which has about an 8-year history. He listed the meetings held during the Environmental Assessment (EA) Phase and the Design Phase.

He listed the adopted plans currently in place. He pointed out that the project was consistent with all of the local government development plans.

He addressed the economic impact over which there has been some controversy. He maintained that studies to date indicate that median projects generally have little overall adverse impact on business activity. He listed the advantages of having safer and faster access to businesses.

He addressed right of way impacts, which are shared during every public meeting. He described the process of working with individual property owners on site-specific issues.

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SENATOR MENARD asked what percentage of property owners have been dealt with.

JIM AMUNDSEN, Project Manager, Central Region Design/Engineering, Department of Transportation, said 20 percent.

MR. CAMPBELL showed a picture of right-of-way issues that includes how solutions are continuing to develop for each property.

SENATOR HUGGINS asked for more information about frontage roads.

MR. CAMPBELL showed a slide that portrayed proposed frontage roads. He deferred to Mr. Amundsen to add more information.

SENATOR MENARD inquired about side road width for frontage roads.

MR. CAMPBELL said he did not know; they were determined on a case-by-case basis.

SENATOR MENARD asked if frontage roads were three times the size of a bicycle trail.

SENATOR HUGGINS opined that frontage roads should be parallel to the main road.

MR. CAMPBELL agreed. He noted that some are not parallel and require an intersecting road.

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CHAIR KOOKESH asked what the light green color on the slide depicts.

MR. AMUNDSON explained that it is an existing roadway and an existing right-of-way. He showed which roads were frontage roads and those that would be extended without having to remove businesses.

MR. CAMPBELL addressed environmental impact issues. He noted it is a challenging project and involves a lengthy process that includes numerous public meetings. He stressed the need to improve the safety in the current corridor. He emphasized that DOT is listening to people and the result would be a facility that would greatly improve the safety and mobility of the people in Alaska.

SENATOR MENARD noted the whole project was funded by federal dollars.

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SENATOR HUGGINS said that people would have competing perspectives on the project.

CHAIR KOOKESH opened public testimony.

KENNETH RAY, representing himself, testified in favor of the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass. He agreed that there have been many public hearings and input; however, he said he did not trust the special interest requests. He opined that DOT must be sensitive to property owners and businesses. He said the project has been fairly well run and he spoke in support of it.

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DIANE WOODRUFF, representing herself, testified on the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass project. She related a concern that there has been no resolution by the Wasilla Planning Commission on the project. She said that DOT made a presentation to Wasilla's planning department and was told that it was consistent with Wasilla's comprehensive plan. She noted that DOT was listening to concerns and making changes.

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ROGER PURCELL, representing himself, testified against the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass. He opined that DOT has been deceptive during the project in order to promote the preferred alternate route. He said they misrepresented Houston's position. He opined that there was inadequate public notice. He said that there is no mention of the Houston comprehensive plan in the packet.

SENATOR MENARD requested DOT's opinion.

MR. AMUNDSEN related the process used to meet with the City of Houston and how updates were communicated. He maintained that DOT is meeting its obligations and commitments. He took offense at Mr. Purcell's implications.

SENATOR MENARD asked if the project timeline would be two more years.

MR. AMUNDSEN said yes.

SENATOR HUGGINS pointed out that the issue of extending the project to Hawk Lane is not a dead issue. He addressed the issue of the intersection of Big Lake Road and the Parks Highway and stated that it is an ongoing discussion. He said he expected progress to be made on those two issues.

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DALLAS MASSIE, Commander, American Legion Post, testified against the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass. He noted a problem with the design plan and a traffic light on the project. He made suggestions for changes to the plan, maintaining there was no vision for the future.

PAUL GARDNER, representing himself, testified against the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass. He discussed the four DOT meetings, which he found inadequate. He maintained that DOT wanted to push their project through and did not listen to opposing views. He spoke of his appeal to the planning officials, which was granted. He continued to testify against the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass and detailed his complaints.

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BETH BASSNEY, representing herself, testified against the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass. She said she was upset about her building being torn down and the lack of communication.

BETH FREAD, representing herself, testified against the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass. She spoke of her experience attending meetings and making requests, which she said, were ignored. She listed her reasons for opposition, such as lack of light and space. She suggested a 5-lane road.

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ROBERT HALL, representing Mayor Thompson, testified against the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass. He disputed the location of the project and said it divides two commercially zoned areas in Houston. He complained about the details of the current plan. He voiced concern about U-turns and the attitude of DOT.

CHAIR KOOKESH asked for clarification that Mr. Hall was speaking for the City of Houston.

MR. HALL said he was speaking in place of the mayor. He noted that a formal response from Houston would be forthcoming.

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TIM SWEZEY, representing himself, testified during the discussion of the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass. He suggested that the Mat-Su Borough also participate in the discussion of the project because they share concerns about highway improvements. He described the Parks Highway transportation plan as it relates to the Mat-Su.

BILL KRAMER, President, Big Lake Community Council, testified in favor of the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass. He described Big Lake's current use of the highway and the goals of their transportation committee. He said the 4-lane Bypass is consistent with Big Lake's transportation plan. He shared his own experience with improvements to his property. He was not opposed to looking at other options, but stressed that safety was of utmost importance.

BERKLEY TILTON, Knik Fairview Community Council, testified against the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass. He voiced concern about a future road development in the Knik area. He noted a negative economic impact from having a divided highway. He spoke against changes to the main road in Houston. He did not know how school busses would make turnarounds on the Parks Highway.

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MR. AMUNDSEN pointed out that there are still a number of issues to be worked out on the project. There is a process DOT uses to deal with the challenges. He said he expects to work for two more years addressing businesses' concerns. He stressed that it is a process and DOT is now at the point where they deal one-on-one to solve right-of-way issues.

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VERNE RUPRIGHT, Mayor, City of Wasilla, testified against the Parks Highway-Wasilla Bypass. He referred to a photo of Wasilla to clarify the layout. He recalled the history of the George Parks Highway in the 70's. He said that the Mat-Su Borough has three organized cities.

He related that Wasilla has changed dramatically over the last 20 years. He suggested lowering the speed limit in Wasilla. He said there is no room for the city to grow. He described two areas with a divided highway and predicted that higher speeds would cause more injuries. He described how the Parks Highway became Wasilla's main street. He did not want Wasilla to become a crossroad of two major highways.

He urged DOT to continue the public process and to look at the possibility of using a divided 5-lane highway. He gave examples of other communities that use 5-lanes to accommodate businesses.

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SENATOR HUGGINS suggested bypasses might be an answer. He requested Mayor Rupright's opinion of a bypass to Wasilla.

MAYOR RUPRIGHT related how a bypass might work and the changes it might present for the city.

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SENATOR MENARD thanked the committee for hearing this contentious issue.

SENATOR HUGGINS echoed Senator Menard's ideas. He said the process is about progress and better roads. He appreciated the forum. He suggested DOT give consideration to moose crossings and the Stanly light. He also suggested that there should be more discussions with property owners.

CHAIR KOOKESH said he appreciated the discussion.

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There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Kookesh adjourned the Senate Transportation Standing Committee at 2:21 p.m.