

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE TRANSPORTATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 3, 2022

1:09 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Grier Hopkins, Chair  
Representative Sara Hannan, Vice Chair  
Representative Louise Stutes  
Representative Harriet Drummond  
Representative Tom McKay  
Representative Kevin McCabe  
Representative Mike Cronk

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION: DOTPF WINTER STORM RESPONSE AND 2021 OPERATIONS OVERVIEW

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

RYAN ANDERSON, Commissioner Designee  
Department of Transportation and Public Facilities  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented a PowerPoint, titled "Alaska Department of Public Facilities Department Overview."

ROB CARPENTER, Deputy Commissioner  
Department of Transportation and Public Facilities.  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Addressed the department's budget during the PowerPoint presentation.

LANCE MEARIG, Director  
Southcoast Region Division  
Department of Transportation and Public Facilities

Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Addressed the Southcoast Region of Alaska during the PowerPoint presentation.

WOLFGANG JUNGE, Director  
Central Region Division  
Department of Transportation and Public Facilities  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Addressed the Central Region of Alaska during the PowerPoint presentation.

JOE KEMP, Director  
Northern Region Division  
Department of Transportation and Public Facilities  
Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Addressed the Northern Region of Alaska during the PowerPoint presentation.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

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**CHAIR GRIER HOPKINS** called the House Transportation Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:09 p.m. Representatives Drummond, Hannan, McKay, McCabe, Cronk, and Hopkins were present at the call to order. Representative Stutes arrived as the meeting was in progress.

#### **PRESENTATION: DOTPF Winter Storm Response and 2021 Operations Overview**

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CHAIR HOPKINS announced that the only order of business would be the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities' presentation on winter storm response and its 2021 operations overview.

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RYAN ANDERSON, Commissioner Designee, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF), presented a PowerPoint, titled "Alaska Department of Public Facilities Department Overview" [hard copy included in the committee packet]. He emphasized the unique geography of Alaska, which has six distinct climate zones and different maintenance districts. He added that maintenance depends on the terrain

within the district. He pointed out how the department addresses seismic activity, manages the large number of the state's airports, and manages the ice roads, which are important to small communities for commerce and freight. He stated that the department works with the 231 Tribes and cultural groups to ensure these communities are getting the most out of DOT&PF projects and facilities.

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ROB CARPENTER, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, addressed the department's budget during the PowerPoint presentation. He gave information about the statewide capital budget, shown on slide 3. He stated that much of the department's funding goes towards contractors and consultants. Designing, engineering, and construction oversight also make up a significant portion of the DOT&PF operating budget. A portion of its funding comes from federal sources, mainly the general fund match. The Highways Equipment Working Capital Fund is an internal service fund used to replace equipment.

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COMMISSIONER DESIGNEE ANDERSON continued the presentation on slide 4 and discussed challenges facing the department, including a limited workforce in certain locations, along with recruitment and retention. Other challenges involve a stressed supply chain and increased costs. In response to Representative Stutes, he expressed the necessity for state funds to be used to be able to hire a grant writer, who could then apply for federal grants. For additional funding sources, he pointed out the department could hire contractors to write grants, tap into the potential of the Alaska Municipal League, and compete nationally for discretionary grants. However, he said that with increased project miles comes increased costs for maintenance, these challenges could be solved with innovation.

COMMISSIONER DESIGNEE ANDERSON summarized the department's infrastructure, stating that there are 11,756 miles of roads maintained by DOT&PF. He stated that compared with many other states, this is relatively few. He pointed out that the Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS) is unique to Alaska. He continued that 839 bridges and public facilities will require special focus soon, while three tunnels in the state are owned and maintained by DOT&PF, including the 2.5-mile Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel near Whittier. He concluded that there is

approximately \$12.6 billion in transportation asset infrastructure.

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LANCE MEARIG, Director, Southcoast Region Division, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, addressed the Southcoast Region of Alaska. He proceeded to slide 6, discussing the additional \$475,000 in overtime and commodities usage in December 2021 through January 2022. This is compared to the same timeframe in the prior fiscal year. In the Southcoast Region there were increased road closures which impacted the public and the safety of plow crews. There were diverted and canceled flights due to icy conditions on airport surfaces. Existing drainage infrastructure, such as ditches and culverts, are undersized to handle the volumes of water created by high intensity "atmospheric river" rainfall events in the region. He confirmed that the formula funding will cover culvert and ditch upgrades and improvements as part of regular maintenance and operations. Moving to slide 7, he pointed out the details of the Southcoast Region Maintenance Districts. In response to a committee question concerning staffing shortages, he recalled the vacancy rate being around 10 or 12 percent and up to 50 percent in some remote areas. He offered to follow up with more detailed vacancy rates to the committee.

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MR. MEARIG listed projects which are upcoming and currently happening in the Southcoast Region Division. He expressed the opinion that 2022 is going to be one of the biggest construction years on record. The Katlian Bay project in Sitka is the most difficult project in the region and will likely run out of funding because of challenges and change orders. It is estimated that the project will continue through the 2025 construction season and cost another \$20 million to complete. He explained that the Katlian Bay project was created to connect access for recreation and subsistence use for the residents of Sitka. The road connects to a network of U.S. Forest Service roads which have already been constructed. In the end the project will cost about \$69 million, as the road involves about seven miles of new road construction and was a voter-approved project in the 2012 bond package. He stated that in Juneau, the Egan Drive and Yandukin Intersection Improvement Project is in its highway safety improvements phase. He stated that construction will involve a speed zone and turning lanes, and it is slated to begin construction next summer.

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MR. MEARIG listed a few upcoming projects. He stated that work will begin on the Ketchikan Herring Cove Bridge Improvement Project this summer. He stated that the Sitka Sawmill Creek Road Resurfacing and Pedestrian Improvements will start and end this upcoming summer, and the State Street Pavement and Rehabilitation Project in Skagway will begin in 2022 and finish in 2024.

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WOLFGANG JUNGE, Director, Central Region Division, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, addressed the Central Region of Alaska. He noted that the Central Region Division serves over 100 rural communities and Alaska's most populated urban areas, including Anchorage, the Matanuska-Susitna Valley, and Kenai. The division not only includes road networks, but it also has an aviation network of 70 airports, including the busiest airport in the state. He added that the division also maintains the longest highway tunnel, which connects Whittier with the National Highway System.

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MR. JUNGE, in response to a question from Chair Hopkins concerning aging equipment, said the Highways Equipment Working Capital Fund receives contributions each month, which aggregates money so when a piece of equipment needs to be replaced, capital credits in the fund can be utilized. Currently, the department needs two more plows and is using decommissioned vehicles in the meantime.

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MR. JUNGE proceeded to slide 4, titled "Central Region Maintenance Accomplishments." He stated that there were two emergency responses in 2021, including a Hatcher Pass avalanche and the Sterling Highway mudslide. In both cases, the department was able to respond quickly and close the road on both sides. Safety crews worked to assess and remove snow or debris. Communication with the public via social media and the Alaska 511 communication system was successful. As a result of these situations, he said, the region's crews began pre-staging equipment in key areas to expedite response times. He described the innovation with "road swaps." He stated that the Matanuska-

Susitna Borough, Anchorage, and Kenai collaborated by trading the maintenance of several smaller roads. This exchange helped with the increased costs associated with continuous sliding systems along these high-volume corridors.

MR. JUNGE addressed the Anchorage energy project, which resulted in 3,500 streetlights being upgraded to LEDs. A wireless control network was implemented to monitor and control the lights remotely. He stated that this project was funded by energy-cost savings from the LED upgrades. He addressed salt brine locations, which have been strategically placed throughout the region for use when the environmental conditions are favorable. This is opposed to the use of sand and salt.

MR. JUNGE detailed some new and ongoing capital improvement projects. He stated that there are 150 construction staff who are responsible for all highway and aviation projects. On average, the department administers between 30 and 50 projects per year for the Central Region Division. In addition to the department staff, consultants are heavily relied upon under the direct supervision of project managers. He stated that the goal of the department is to minimize construction impacts to the public while delivering necessary capital improvements. He related that he anticipates a robust construction program for 2022, with \$500 million going towards highway and aviation projects. He stated that in 2022, Anchorage will receive 17 federally funded construction projects.

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MR. JUNGE described some of the 13 major construction projects on the Kenai Peninsula for this year. Most notably, he said, the Sterling Highway Milepost 45-60 Project will be entering its second year of construction, with an expected completion date of 2027. He said the estimated cost of \$500 million is for the entire project duration. He added that work will also begin on the Seward Highway Milepost 17-22.5 Rehabilitation Project. This project will replace and rehabilitate bridges, widen the highway with minor realignments, and create slow vehicle turnouts for added safety.

MR. JUNGE informed the committee that the Matanuska-Susitna Valley is the fastest growing area in the state, with over 50 construction projects this year. Construction will begin on phase one of the Knik Goose Bay Road Reconstruction Project. This project will turn the existing two-lane road into a divided four-lane highway. He continued that larger capital improvement

projects involve a deliberate public involvement planning process where stakeholders are invited to make comments and express concerns. With the potential establishment of the municipal planning organization in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, stakeholder involvement will increase, which will benefit future projects.

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MR. JUNGE noted that the Seward Highway Safety Initiative is in its final chapter of eliminating the last remaining safety corridor in the state. Improvement of 28 miles of the highway remains, including a two-lane road with challenging curves, guardrails, and cliffs. The peak summer traffic has over 21,000 cars per day, and the two-lane section quickly becomes congested, and this causes driver frustration and crashes. Between one and four deaths per year occur due to crashes in this area. The plan involves the construction of interchanges at the Girdwood turnoff and the Sterling Highway intersections, along with reconstructing the highway between Indian Valley and Rabbit Creek Road. Construction for this project is anticipated to begin as early as 2024. He remarked that pedestrian and bike paths are included in the plans for this stretch of road. He stated that the estimated total cost for the Seward Highway Safety Initiative is \$700 million.

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MR. JUNGE addressed two major weather events which impacted the transportation system in the Central Region in the past year. A mudslide at milepost 50 on the Sterling Highway caused a few days of limited travel for the public and cost about \$150,000. The second major weather event was a wind event in Matanuska-Susitna Valley. The estimated windspeeds were above 80 mph, with wind chills down to -35 degrees Fahrenheit. He stated that conditions were dangerous, and damage to signs and traffic signals was significant. Ongoing wind resulted in power outages which delayed repairs for several days. He stated that the estimated costs came to \$160,000.

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MR. JUNGE pointed out slide 20, which displayed the rural aviation capital improvement grant for the Central Region Division. He said this will include nine rural airport projects, with a value of \$183 million. He said that one of the projects involves relocating the Newtok Airport because of

coastal erosion, with a cost of \$31 million. He explained that each of these nine projects will improve airport conditions and safety, decrease maintenance, and prevent further erosion of airport facilities. These projects are vital for connecting rural Alaskans with the Alaska economy. He said 81 percent of rural airports are not connected to the road system, and air travel is the only travel for some rural communities, which includes emergency medical travel.

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JOE KEMP, Director, Northern Region Division, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, addressed the Northern Region of Alaska, concentrating on maintenance and operations. He stated that the Northern Region is the largest region in the state with 104 airports and 35 maintenance stations. The average equipment age is 7 to 14 years. The Northern Region Division has the lowest staff vacancy rate, with only two vacancies currently. He said the region's construction season for 2022 is expected to be robust with approximately \$273 million in contractor payments. There are 42 new projects in the region totaling \$183 million, as well as the 22 projects carried over from 2021, which totals \$90 million.

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MR. KEMP stated that there are 16 new projects in Fairbanks and North Pole. He said that 12 carryover projects have been strategically spaced to ease complications with the increased number of ongoing projects. He continued that the Selawik Barge Landing Access Road and Boardwalk Improvements Project will be constructed in 2022, with a cost estimate between \$5 million and \$10 million. He stated that the Lake Louise Road Milepost 9-19 Resurfacing Project contract was awarded for \$6 million. He stated that this work will start around May 2022. The resurfacing project will include a chip-seal surface treatment to minimize dust. The final design was recently submitted by the consultant for the Alaska Highway Milepost 1235-1252 and 1222-1226 Rehabilitation Project and will likely be a two-year project due to its complexity and the length of the road. This project will include foamed asphalt to prevent frost heaves and cracks.

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MR. KEMP described the weather events in December 2021, which involved heavy precipitation followed by winds and extreme cold.

Many roads were completely closed from the weather. All stations responded with crew overtime. Off-shift operators from Dalton were utilized, as well as additional contractors who were all extremely helpful. He stated that this required an additional \$2.5 million.

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CHAIR HOPKINS thanked the presenters.

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ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Transportation Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 2:54 p.m.