

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE TRANSPORTATION STANDING COMMITTEE

May 5, 2022

1:50 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Louise Stutes

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 35

Supporting the completion of the Northern Rail Extension; supporting the increase in defensive capabilities at Fort Greely, Alaska; and encouraging the development of critical Arctic infrastructure.

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HJR 35

SHORT TITLE: NORTHERN RAIL EXTENSION

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) CRONK

02/22/22	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/22/22	(H)	MLV, TRA
03/01/22	(H)	MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
03/01/22	(H)	Heard & Held
03/01/22	(H)	MINUTE (MLV)
03/03/22	(H)	MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
03/03/22	(H)	Moved HJR 35 Out of Committee
03/03/22	(H)	MINUTE (MLV)
03/07/22	(H)	MLV RPT 6DP
03/07/22	(H)	DP: RAUSCHER, CLAMAN, NELSON, TARR, STORY, TUCK
05/05/22	(H)	TRA AT 1:00 PM BARNES 124

WITNESS REGISTER

SUE STANCLIFF, Staff
Representative Mike Cronk
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions during the hearing on HJR 35 on behalf of Representative Cronk, prime sponsor.

BRIAN LINDAMOOD, Vice President and Chief Engineer
Alaska Railroad
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave a PowerPoint presentation, titled "Northern Rail Extension Status," during the hearing on HJR 35.

BONNIE WOLDSTAD, representing self
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified during the hearing on HJR 35.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:50:43 PM](#)

CHAIR GRIER HOPKINS called the House Transportation Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:50 p.m. Representatives Hopkins, Hannan, McCabe, McKay, Drummond, and Cronk were present at the call to order.

HJR 35-NORTHERN RAIL EXTENSION

[1:51:31 PM](#)

CHAIR HOPKINS announced that the only order of business would be HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 35, "Supporting the completion of the Northern Rail Extension; supporting the increase in defensive capabilities at Fort Greely, Alaska; and encouraging the development of critical Arctic infrastructure."

[1:51:48 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK introduced HJR 35 as prime sponsor . He gave the sponsor statement [included in the committee packet], which reads as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Completing the Northern Rail Extension to Fort Greely and Delta Junction would support Military operations, mining, and agriculture in the Interior of Alaska.

There is a long history with the railroad, dating back to 1914 when Congress authorized the construction of a railroad in Alaska. Finally, in 2013, almost one hundred years later, the Northern rail expansion was proposed by Alaska Railroad in conjunction with the Department of Defense, the four phased plan was completed. Phase one, Crossing the Tanana River, was completed. The remaining three phases need to be accomplished before we can realize completion of the Northern rail expansion.

With the continued expansion of the Fort Greely missile complex and expanded training ranges, agriculture in Delta Junction, and increased mining operations in the area the railroad is more important than ever. This resolution supports the critical infrastructure development, national security, economic development, and natural resource development in the State of Alaska.

The Northern Rail Extension project would provide essential freight and passenger service to support transportation and mobility needs of the region. This is a project long overdue for Alaska and I ask for your support for this resolution.

[1:53:42 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked about the level of support from the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD).

[1:54:18 PM](#)

SUE STANCLIFF, Staff, Representative Mike Cronk, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Representative Cronk, prime sponsor of HJR 35, stated that the DoD is an active participant and has provided some funding for the project.

[1:54:55 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked how much money was put into phase one and how much money [DoD] is willing to put in.

MS. STANCLIFF answered that she is unsure.

[1:56:10 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked how the bridge is holding up.

CHAIR HOPKINS asked which bridge Representative McCabe was referring to.

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE responded the longest bridge in Alaska and said that the bridge doesn't see much use.

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK stated that the bridge is still used often by the military.

[1:57:14 PM](#)

CHAIR HOPKINS asked about the different phases of construction.

MS. STANCLIFF responded that phase 2 is approximately 13 miles of rail from the Chena River overflow structure to the Tanana River crossing; phase 3 is approximately 30 miles from the west side of the crossing to Donnelly training area; and phase 4 is approximately 38 miles from the Donnelly training area to Delta Junction, Alaska. She added that part of the project would include the construction of a depot in Delta Junction.

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REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND noted that she was part of the first legislative tour to the Delta Junction agricultural area since the 1980s. She said that the people comprising the area would be greatly appreciative of the rail extension if it were built.

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REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked where the Fort Greely training areas are in relation to the proposed rail extension.

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK answered that he is unsure the exact extent and location of the training areas.

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE pointed out a spot on the map that shows the boundaries of the training areas.

[2:02:53 PM](#)

BRIAN LINDAMOOD, Vice President and Chief Engineer, Alaska Railroad, stated that he has worked on this project for 10 years. He began a PowerPoint presentation, [hard copy included

in the committee packet], titled "Northern Rail Extension Status," on slide 2 and showed a map with military training areas in relation to the proposed rail extension. He added that Fort Greely is located in the area on the map in which the Donnelly training area meets the Richardson Highway. He stated that the rail extension begins directly east of North Pole, Alaska, and follows the Tanana River down to Fort Greely before ending in Delta Junction.

MR. LINDAMOOD moved to slide 3 and gave a brief overview of the railway's timeline. He stated that the military raised concerns in the early 2000s about its only access to training areas being on icy roads. Federal agencies completed the environmental impact statement (EIS) in 2009, and construction of the first phase began in 2010, which was completed in 2014. He added that the DoD contributed approximately \$100 million towards the project before having its attention turned towards conflicts occurring in the Middle East.

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CHAIR HOPKINS asked how much money was contributed by the State of Alaska.

MR. LINDAMOOD answered \$84 million.

[2:10:23 PM](#)

MR. LINDAMOOD continued to slides 4 and 5 and stated that the bridge crossing the Tanana River was started in 2011 and finished in 2014. The bridge is 3,300 feet long and cost \$188.2 million to build. He said that there were 2 miles of levees built to control flooding to keep the bridge's position over the river stable. He showed a map displaying the routes that were recommended by the environmental analysis.

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CHAIR HOPKINS asked for an explanation of the Section of Environmental Analysis (SEA).

MR. LINDAMOOD answered that SEA is part of the Surface Transportation Board (STB) which is a federal agency. He added that the agency has sole jurisdiction over railroads.

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REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked how many routes were approved by the STB.

MR. LINDAMOOD answered that one route was approved, with possible alternative routes for certain sections based on the findings of the Army Corp of Engineers. In response to a follow-up question, he said that only 2 of 50 people within the DoD that provided input on the project are still working in their current positions, adding to the complexity of the project.

REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked which route is preferred by the Alaska Railroad.

MR. LINDAMOOD answered the route highlighted in yellow.

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MR. LINDAMOOD continued to slides 6 and 7 and showed a map displaying highlighted sections of the project differentiating between each phase. He stated that phase 2 is the bridge, which is complete other than the rail that would need to be added. He said that the longer the project is put on hold, the greater the risk that environmental agencies will require reevaluation. The project would take at least 5 years to complete, and unresolved issues include a terminal facility in Delta Junction and section lines. He said that the cost estimate of \$1 billion from 2012 is now outdated.

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MR. LINDAMOOD added more context to the issue of section lines, stating that the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) could give more land to the Alaska Railroad. He said that public access to different section lines would need to be worked out, as there are some areas in which it would not make sense for the public to have access. He added that the plans for the Delta Junction facility are still in the works.

[2:28:14 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked whether different specifications would need to be met for the railroad based on what it is meant to transport.

MR. LINDAMOOD answered that road and railroad engineering are different.

[2:30:02 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked whether the estimated cost of \$1 billion is firm.

MR. LINDAMOOD answered that due to increased costs, the estimate would be \$1.7 billion, although it is preliminary.

[2:31:56 PM](#)

CHAIR HOPKINS asked where the Canadian rail system ends.

MR. LINDAMOOD answered Fort Nelson. In response to a follow-up question, he stated that it is between 1,600 and 1,700 miles away from the Alaska border.

[2:33:30 PM](#)

CHAIR HOPKINS opened public testimony on HJR 35.

[2:33:55 PM](#)

BONNIE WOLDSTAD, representing self, stated she supports the rail extension, although there are other issues she believes the Alaska Railroad should address. She stated that public access to crossings should be addressed in a way that complies with state statutes and protects private property.

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REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked Ms. Woldstad to help narrow down the citations she gave.

MS. WOLDSTAD answered that there are current conflicts the Alaska Railroad has with the Alaska Railroad Act. She said that it is possible that homesteads, including her own, could be impacted by the current plan of the projects. The federal government has already issued two patents on her homestead.

[2:38:18 PM](#)

CHAIR HOPKINS closed public testimony on HJR 35 after ascertaining nobody else wished to testify.

[2:38:36 PM](#)

The committee took a brief at-ease.

[2:38:43 PM](#)

CHAIR HOPKINS [announced that HJR 35 was held over].

[2:39:25 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Transportation Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 2:39 p.m.