

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE TRANSPORTATION STANDING COMMITTEE

January 26, 2023

1:32 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator James Kaufman, Chair
Senator David Wilson, Vice Chair
Senator Löki Tobin
Senator Jesse Kiehl
Senator Robert Myers

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

OVERVIEW: DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION AND PUBLIC FACILITIES

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

RYAN ANDERSON, Commissioner
Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a Department of Transportation and Public Facilities Department overview and answered questions.

KATHERINE KEITH, Deputy Commissioner
Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a Department of Transportation and Public Facilities Department overview and answered questions.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:32:08 PM](#)

CHAIR JAMES KAUFMAN called the Senate Transportation Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:32 p.m. Present at the call to

order were Senators Myers, Kiehl, Tobin, Wilson and Chair Kaufman.

At ease from 1:33:05 p.m. to 1:33:40 p.m.

CHAIR KAUFMAN reconvened the meeting and continued with introduction of support staff.

**OVERVIEW: DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION AND
PUBLIC FACILITIES**

1:34:07 PM

CHAIR KAUFMAN introduced Commissioner Anderson and Deputy Commissioner Keith and invited them to begin the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF) overview.

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RYAN ANDERSON, Commissioner, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF), Juneau, Alaska, presented a Department of Transportation and Public Facilities Department Overview and answered questions. He introduced Deputy Commissioner Keith. He surmised that the overview might stimulate questions and follow-up presentations.

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RYAN ANDERSON, Commissioner, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF), Juneau, Alaska, presented the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities overview. He started with slide 2, DOTPF Organization. He spoke about the deputy commissioner, regional directors and legislative communications. He mentioned the four boards sponsored by the commissioner including the Alaska Marine Highway Operations Board, the Aviation Advisory Board, the Roads and Highways Advisory Board and the Executive Facilities Management Advisory Committee.

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COMMISSIONER ANDERSON continued with slide 3, Mission: Keep Alaska Moving. The focus is on safety and efficiency as they relate to transportation. The department's core values are integrity, excellence, respect and safety. He highlighted the defining statute:

DOT&PF oversees a network of highways that link together cities and communities throughout the state, thereby contributing to the development of commerce and industry in the state, and that aids in the extraction and development

of its resources, and improves the economic and general welfare of the people of the state (AS 19.05.125)

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KATHERINE KEITH, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF), Anchorage, Alaska, informed the committee about her certifications and professional history. She moved to slide 4, Alaska's Transportation System. She proclaimed that Alaska's environment created challenges for the transportation system. She noted that Alaska has 586 square miles, which is larger than Texas, Montana and California combined. She spoke to each region's individual challenges. She highlighted the map and the red maintenance and operation (M&O) stations that keep airports and highways open regardless of weather conditions. Airports serve over 80 percent of Alaskan communities. She expressed pride in the Alaska Marine Highway System.

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MS. KEITH advanced to slide 5, Alaska's DOT&PF Infrastructure, and stated that the department must provide safe and equitable transportation regardless of the environmental challenges or workplace shortages. She highlighted that the measurement standards division inspected over seven thousand pieces of equipment. She added that the department owned three tunnels and operated four.

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COMMISSIONER ANDERSON advanced to slide 6, DOT&PF Budgets & Funding. He pointed to past successes within the department. In FY 22 the department produced over \$933 million in conjunction with the private sector. This funding went toward road maintenance and new infrastructure. He pointed out strategies that allow for federal funding that other states were missing. He noted the operating budget of \$438 million and capital budget of \$1.4 billion. The department's capital budget is healthy and obtainable.

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MS. KEITH continued the department overview with attention to the budget. She mentioned the discretionary grants awarded to the department. She reported that applications for approximately \$500 million in grants for the Alaska Marine Highway System were awaiting review. She mentioned the successful award of a \$285 million grant to build new vessels and rebuild terminals and docks. She spoke about the success obtaining \$28 million from

the United States Maritime Administration through their Port Infrastructure Development Program.

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SENATOR KAUFMAN directed attention to slide 7, Our Team. He recalled challenges understanding the department's organizational structure. He asked more about the team's organization.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON explained that the department spans Alaska and is divided into three regions. The department employes over three thousand people. He spoke about the various regions and the division oversight. The various teams are outlined in slide 7. He pointed to the statewide equipment fleet that served all agencies across the state. The Division of Facilities Services D worked with other agencies around Alaska. The structure was largely related to transportation, but public facilities fell under the department as well.

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COMMISSIONER ANDERSON reviewed DOTPF's five priority investment areas for the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funds. He spoke about slide 8: Strategic Investment Areas.

SAFETY

ECONOMIC VITALITY

STATE OF GOOD REPAIR (SOGR)

RESILIENCY

SUSTAINABILITY

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MS. KEITH reviewed slide 9, Organizational Excellence:

WORKFORCE

COMMUNICATION

CULTURE

INNOVATION

INFORMATION

RESOURCING

PROJECT DELIVERY

MS. KEITH spoke about trust and team building. She spoke to the improvement of the onboarding program. She noted that dashboards and cloud-based project portals ensured transparent communications. The commissioner is the leader of the workforce action team.

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COMMISSIONER ANDERSON expounded on his role leading the workforce action team. Employees are gathered from all sections of DOTPF to collect opinions about workforce development. The opinions were unique and valuable to the planning processes. He mentioned airport employment incentives known as mission critical incentive pay. The team observed various incentives including scheduling or salary optimization.

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MS. KEITH advanced to slide 10, "Services to Alaskans."

- Safety Corridors
- West Coast Alaska Storm Response
- Winter Maintenance
- Community-Driven Planning
- AMHS Reliability

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COMMISSIONER ANDERSON advanced to slide 11, Safety Corridors. Last year Alaska had 81 highway fatalities, one of the highest number of fatalities in years. He spoke about the concerns and strategies to mitigate fatality rates. He talked about establishing safety corridors. The slide depicted a graph of crash rates. Legislation implemented in 2006 allows for safety corridors, which impact serious crash rates.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON advanced to slide 12, Safety Corridors: Next Steps. He pointed to solutions included engineering, enforcement, education and emergency response. The safety corridors transition two-lane into four-lane highways to address increases in traffic volumes.

Solutions: Engineering, Enforcement,
Education, Emergency Response

Engineering Solutions

- Seward Highway, Potter Marsh to Girdwood
- Parks Highway, Wasilla to Houston
- Sterling Highway, Sterling to Soldotna
- Knik-Goose Bay Road, Palmer-Wasilla Highway to Point MacKenzie Road

Education Campaigns

Enforcement Campaigns

- Bureau of Highway Patrol

Emergency Response Support

- Glenn Highway Integrated Corridor Management

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MS. KEITH advanced to slide 13, West Coast Alaska Storm Response: Next Steps.

Risks: Safety, Resiliency

Challenges

- Multiple day storm Sept. 16-19
- Impacts over hundreds of miles
- High winds, strong coastal wave, storm surge, floods
- Norton Sound sea level rise of 8-18 ft.
- Over 50 miles of fed-aid highway damaged

Solutions

- Local DOT&PF maintenance took early actions to reopen runways
- Emergency Declarations completed quickly
- Emergency Procurements prioritized
- Contractors, Communities, & DOT&PF staff teamed up to repair infrastructure
- Partnerships with DMVA, DEC, FAA, ANTHC, FEMA, FHWA, Local Governments & more

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MS. KEITH advanced to slide 14, West Coast Alaska Storm Response: Next Steps. She spoke about mindset shifts following the surveys. She noted that the department provides assessments in in 36 damaged communities. The information was gathered before the snow fell to allow time to establish eligibility for emergency repairs. She stressed that the damage across the communities was significant and only a portion of the emergency

repairs were completed. The department provided incident command system response training to staff.

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COMMISSIONER ANDERSON reviewed slide 15, Winter Maintenance. He explained the challenges:

- Increasing frequency of extreme events
- Vacancies, shortage of qualified workers
- Supply chain challenges
- Constrained resources

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON continued with slide 16, Winter Maintenance: Next Steps.

Solutions: Partnering, Workforce Development; Recruitment Retention, Flexibility / Scalability

Partnering

- Local Government coordination
- Leveraging DOT&PF resources statewide

Workforce Development

- Incident Command System training
- CDL, Equipment Operators

Recruitment Retention

- Flexible work schedules 1X1 & 2X2
- Mission Critical Incentive Pay

Flexibility/Scalability

- Use of contracts for emergency response
- Use of contracts or local government agreements to meet basic level of service

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COMMISSIONER ANDERSON advanced to slide 17, Community-Driven Planning.

Risks: Safety, State of Good Repair, Economic Vitality, Resiliency

Challenges:

- Alaska has many rural, unorganized areas
- Alaska is multi-modal, funding is not

- Geographical expanse of planning areas are largest in the nation
- Alaskan communities are unique in their Transportation needs.

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COMMISSIONER ANDERSON advanced to slide 18, Community-Driven Planning: Next Steps. He spoke to the value of Rural Planning Organizations (RPO). The organizations serve as a transportation policy board for various regions. Agreements were established with the Northwest Arctic Borough, the Fairbanks North Star Borough, the Copper Valley Development Association and the Bristol Bay Borough.

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MS. KEITH advanced to slide 19, AMHS Reliability.

Risks: Safety, State of Good Repair, Economic Vitality

Aging vessels more expensive, longer in shipyard, impacting schedule and budgets.

Challenges

- Unexpected delays for travelling public
- Overhaul timeframes increase
- Overhaul expense increasing
- Essential service to coastal communities is reduced with due to ship availability reductions

MS. KEITH advanced to slide 20, "AMHS Reliability: Next Steps.

Solutions: Capital investment; IIJA; Discretionary Grants

- Charting the Course Initiative
- Operational Audit
- Review of maintenance and overhaul practices
- Leverage younger ships in the fleet
- Pursue capital program for vessel replacement via IIJA funding, discretionary grants

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COMMISSIONER ANDERSON announced the completion of the overview.

[2:26:17 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL directed attention to slide 8 and asked the commissioner to expound on resiliency planning. He asked about the Haines Highway Project.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON answered that the first part of resiliency planning involves data collection related to flood levels and storm events. He recalled ice events that affected the Dalton Highway. The department addressed the issue with data collection via surveys and hydrologist consultations. The rebuilt Dalton Highway was the geographic feature in the area. The Haines Highway required a historical review prior to a new design. Sometimes costs weighed into planning and implementation. He spoke to the federal concept of twice-hit assets where emergency funds were used for repair. Those assets were liable to federal requirements.

SENATOR KIEHL asked if weather data was also consulted.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON acknowledged the importance of weather data.

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CHAIR KAUFMAN mentioned that hydrographic weather may involve flooding. The weather data may be too broad for Alaskan forecasting.

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SENATOR WILSON directed attention to slide 12 and asked about safety corridors. He spoke about two safety corridors in the Mat-Su valley. He wondered if other safety corridors were planned for the state.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON answered that the department was able to decommission the safety corridor through Wasilla. The focus of safety corridors spurred community conversations and safety initiatives. He highlighted the issue of pedestrian fatality rates.

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SENATOR WILSON pointed to road expansion from two to four lanes. He asked about a four-lane highway from Fairbanks to Homer.

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COMMISSIONER ANDERSON responded about the Parks Highway had passing lanes, which ultimately lead to four-lane highways. He noted the expense involved in this type of project. The state is large, and funding drives the projects.

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CHAIR KAUFMAN referred to slide 3. He commented on core values and the term "network of highways." He asked if the terminology was literal. He wondered if "transportation network" might provide more inclusive terminology. He followed with a comment about organizational structure and the management of the department. He suggested an interface with municipalities, stakeholders and the federal government.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON appreciated the ideas and comments. He noted that James Marks from the Division of Program Development oversaw the federal funding programs.

[2:35:22 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN commented on the department's leadership. She asked the department's perspective on land use planning.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON answered that it all begins with planning, but building was part of the balance. He spoke to the value of creative thinking and acknowledged the challenges Fairview faced.

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SENATOR TOBIN commented about safety as a priority.

SENATOR MYERS expressed concern about the reallocation of federal funds. He perceived a use-it-or-lose-it mindset. He asked whether the commissioner plans to mitigate the urgency to spend.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON said he believed that the upcoming federal funding presentation would best address these concerns. Project prioritization is an important component of the issue. Reallocated funds are used for prioritized projects that might see advancement in projected timelines.

SENATOR MYERS asked if the department offers an award system.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON answered the department has an employee recognition program. The employee-sponsored program is a long-term success. Each division selects award nominees, and an employee of the year is selected for the department.

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SENATOR KIEHL asked about staffing issues across the department. He focused on the front lines rather than the engineering staff. He asked if the state competed with private sector compensation.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON replied that the workforce team evaluation led to better understanding of the problem. He spoke about a system created to reach out to various districts for the relevant vacancy information.

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MS. KEITH spoke about the Alaska Marine Highway System vacancy rate. She stated that the vacancy rate compromised reliability. The department sought to attract the workforce with state benefits. The base pay may not be comparable to out-of-state workers, but the benefit package added to the incentive. She mentioned recruitment bonuses of \$5 thousand. She spoke about various training opportunities and paid travel. She commented on the priority of work-life balance.

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SENATOR WILSON mentioned the Alaska Railroad Corporation. He recalled mention of the right-of-way usage of the railroad. He asked if the legislature might help the department navigate solutions.

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COMMISSIONER ANDERSON responded that state funds allowing the advanced purchase of right-of-way would help accelerate project delivery. He spoke about a capital appropriation for event funding that allows for larger projects and increased levels of service for communities. He added that state funding allows flexibility. Federal funds come with many rules associated.

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SENATOR WILSON commented on the commissioner's seat on the Alaska Railroad Corporation. He proposed the separation of the public corporation to a land-bank usage of the railroad.

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CHAIR KAUFMAN stated that he would like to see future committee discussions about the topic.

CHAIR KAUFMAN wondered if he randomly asked a DOTPF employee about the quality improvement plan, would they know what he was talking about.

MS. KEITH answered that it is unlikely. The department is vast and communication teams strive to share the message about these improvement plans. She mentioned a successful participation program. She pointed out the department's Strategic Internal Organizational Excellence Plan.

CHAIR KAUFMAN asked who owns and is responsible for deployment of the improvement plan.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON replied that is the responsibility of the commissioner.

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SENATOR TOBIN asked about deferred maintenance projects.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON responded that deferred maintenance projects were abundant. He recognized the priorities and strategies related to state and federal funding.

[2:58:40 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Kaufman adjourned the Senate Transportation Standing Committee meeting at 2:58 p.m.