

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**HOUSE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 20, 2025

8:10 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Rebecca Himschoot, Co-Chair  
Representative Donna Mears, Co-Chair  
Representative Carolyn Hall  
Representative Ky Holland  
Representative Mike Prax  
Representative Justin Ruffridge

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

HOUSE BILL NO. 26

"An Act relating to the duties of the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities; and relating to a statewide public and community transit plan."

- MOVED CSHB 26(CRA) OUT OF COMMITTEE

CONFIRMATION HEARING(S)

Regulatory Commission of Alaska, Commissioner

Mark Johnston - Anchorage  
Steven Devries - Anchorage  
John Springsteen - Anchorage

- CONFIRMATION(S) ADVANCED

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: HB 26

SHORT TITLE: STATEWIDE PUBLIC & COMMUNITY TRANSIT PLAN

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) MINA

01/22/25	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/10/25
01/22/25	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/22/25	(H)	CRA, TRA
02/27/25	(H)	CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124

02/27/25 (H) Heard & Held  
02/27/25 (H) MINUTE (CRA)  
03/18/25 (H) CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124  
03/18/25 (H) Heard & Held  
03/18/25 (H) MINUTE (CRA)  
03/20/25 (H) CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124

**WITNESS REGISTER**

REPRESENTATIVE GENEVIEVE MINA  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** As prime sponsor, gave an overview of HB 26.

ANDY MILLS, Legislative Liaison  
Department of Transportation & Public Facilities  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered questions during the hearing on HB 26.

MARK JOHNSTON, Commissioner Appointee  
Regulatory Commission of Alaska  
Department of Commerce, Community & Economic Development  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified as the governor's appointee to the Regulatory Commission of Alaska.

STEVEN DEVRIES, Commissioner Appointee  
Regulatory Commission of Alaska  
Department of Commerce, Community & Economic Development

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified as the governor's appointee to the Regulatory Commission of Alaska.

JOHN SPRINGSTEEN, Commissioner Appointee  
Regulatory Commission of Alaska  
Department of Commerce, Community & Economic Development  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified as the governor's appointee to the Regulatory Commission of Alaska.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

8:10:08 AM

**CO-CHAIR DONNA MEARS** called the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:10 a.m.

Representatives Prax, Ruffridge, Hall, Holland, Himschoot, and Mears were present at the call to order.

**HB 26-STATEWIDE PUBLIC & COMMUNITY TRANSIT PLAN**

[8:11:23 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 26, "An Act relating to the duties of the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities; and relating to a statewide public and community transit plan."

[8:11:44 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GENEVIEVE MINA, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, recapped HB 50. She said the bill would broaden the Department of Transportation & Public Facilities' (DOT&PF) scope to be more multi-modal and specifically include public transport in its planning responsibilities.

[8:12:19 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT moved to adopt Amendment 1 to HB 26, labeled 34-LS0276\A.1, Walsh, 3/18/25, which read:

Page 3, line 8, following "operators,"  
Insert "including ferry operators,"

CO-CHAIR MEARS objected for the purpose of discussion.

[8:12:26 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT explained that Amendment 1 would explicitly include ferries in the bill by inserting "including ferry operators" after the word "operators" on page 3, line 8.

[8:12:59 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX expressed opposition to naming specific things within a general authority.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT stated that the ferry system is sometimes siloed, which has not always worked to their advantage. Including them in the bill, she said, would help break down some of those siloes.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX said he received a 298-page report on the long-term plan that makes specific reference to ferries. He added that he felt put out that "his road" is not included in that plan and argued that all transportation should be treated equally.

[8:14:56 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE said he shared Representative Prax's concern about the underlying bill. He cited the DOT&PF fiscal note, which states that the bill would result in no change to operations, funding, or designation of resources. He pointed out that the Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS) issue is one of funding, not planning, and argued that dollars keep being placed into "different places," which is true of the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) as well. He said community transit plans are expensive, particularly in large spread-out places, and reiterated that in many cases, the problem is dollars, not funding, as inferred by the fiscal note.

[8:17:21 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT shared a personal anecdote and stated that if funding were to come, having a plan in place is critical.

[8:18:29 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MINA acknowledged the concerns about calling out one specific modality of transportation in the department's statutory responsibilities. With regard to the broader question of the bill's necessity, she said the bill would broaden the conceptions of transportation away from the bias of having a car in the effort to make the state more accessible and inclusive of those with disabilities.

[8:20:17 AM](#)

ANDY MILLS, Legislative Liaison, Department of Transportation & Public Facilities, confirmed that the fiscal note is fairly well represented by Representative Ruffridge's comments. He explained that there are many federal requirements on planning and the inclusion of transit and other intramodalities that the department follows, as well as consultation and coordination with local governments and Tribal entities as outlined in U.S. Code (USC) and the associated Code of Federal Regulations (CFR). Prior to the introduction of HB 26, he assured the committee

that DOT&PF was already engaging in area planning, modal planning, the long-range transportation plan, and the STIP. He said department activity is largely directed by federal funding and reiterated that the activities outlined in the proposed legislation are already being directed by federal requirements. One caveat, he said, is that the department could benefit from more specificity on where new transit facilities should be added and urged the legislature to direct requests for increased transit funding to the federal government.

[8:24:00 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND stated his support for Amendment 1 while recognizing that it creates specific focus on AMHS in a general plan that he hoped would continue to cover all modalities. He opined that the ferry system is being highlighted because its integral to public transit and tends to be overlooked.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT said she wanted to make sure that ferries are part of the conversation because in discussions on community planning and transit, they're not usually included.

CO-CHAIR MEARS removed her objection.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX objected.

[8:26:52 AM](#)

A roll call vote was taken. Representatives Hall, Holland, Himschoot, and Mears voted in favor of Amendment 1. Representatives Prax and Ruffridge voted against it. Therefore, Amendment 1 was adopted by a vote of 4-2.

CO-CHAIR MEARS sought final comment from the bill sponsor on HB 26, as amended.

[8:27:24 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MINA stated that enshrining public transit in statute would not only highlight DOT&PF's work on transit plans, but also ensure that these efforts would continue to be prioritized if leadership were to change. She emphasized the importance of highlighting the integral nature of public transportation to Alaskans.

CO-CHAIR MEARS sought final comment from committee members.

[8:28:30 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE said he understood the need for this conversation; nonetheless, from Mr. Mills's testimony, he inferred that a lack of federal funding, not planning, is the reason that things aren't getting done. He opined that HB 26 would be better suited as a resolution that highlights Alaska's differences or requests an exception. He spoke to planning efforts in Kenai that have fallen through because there were no dollars attached. He said he would not object to the bill moving forward but shared his belief that HB 26 is more of a conversation tool and not a solution.

[8:31:43 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX opined that the bill is counterproductive because the department is driven by federal funds. He distinguished dreaming from planning, and said planning requires funding. In the Interior, he said there is too much talking and not enough action in compliance with the STIP. Although he appreciated the intent, he reiterated his belief that its counterproductive.

[8:34:27 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT said she is grateful for the bill because the amount of federal funding is unknown. She shared her belief that more would be asked of states going forward and Alaska should be ready.

CO-CHAIR MEARS agreed on the importance of understanding the state's needs.

[8:35:10 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MINA noted that stakeholder engagement is integral to ensure that plans are reflective of community needs. She said the bill would codify stakeholder engagement with public and community transit operators, without which, department plans would not be as strong as they could be to serve Alaskans.

[8:36:17 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT moved to report HB 26, as amended, out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying

fiscal notes. There being no objection, CSHB 26(CRA) moved from the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee.

[8:37:04 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 8:37 a.m. to 8:40 a.m.

**CONFIRMATION HEARING(S)**  
**Regulatory Commission of Alaska, Commissioner**

[8:40:09 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS announced that the final order of business would be confirmation hearings for the Regulatory Commission of Alaska.

[8:41:19 AM](#)

MARK JOHNSTON, Commissioner Appointee, Regulatory Commission of Alaska (RCA), Department of Commerce, Community & Economic Development (DCCED), spoke to his personal and professional background and highlighted his qualifications under AS 42.04.020(b)(3). He listed his work experience as shown on his resume [included in the committee packet] and said it's an honor to serve Alaskans in this position.

[8:44:33 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HALL asked Commissioner Springsteen to speak to the challenges of retaining a workforce and how the legislature could support workforce development and retention within the RCA.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSTON said the technical positions are difficult to fill, especially in competition with utilities that pay more. He described the lateral movement that's offered within the RCA and said out of the box thinking is needed. As such, he said the RCA has been working with the military to identify retirees who are looking for continued employment and value benefits over pay. In doing so, he identified executives for the engineering department and operations, as well as individuals for Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA). He discussed a high school internship program for linemen that helped with recruitment in Colorado to highlight the need for creative solutions.

[8:50:14 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HALL asked Commissioner Johnston to define "laddering positions" and why it's different than a promotion.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSTON said it's when various levels of the same position are attained through experience, thereby offering the ability to gain additional experience and compensation based on achievements.

REPRESENTATIVE HALL asked whether it is merit based.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSTON said it's a function of time served and meeting milestones.

[8:52:21 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND asked the commissioner to describe his experience in rural utility management.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSTON said he worked in a rural area of Colorado. It requires self-sufficiency and the ability to develop people from inside the community. He said Alaska has an opportunity for larger utilities to create affiliations for mentorship through the Alaska Power Association (APA) and use their technical expertise to address priorities in the smaller communities and assist with line loss, for example.

[8:58:51 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked what could be done to better retain staff to ensure that the RCA functions at a high capacity.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSTON spoke to the importance of experienced employees to train staff and grow the workforce from within. He added that job satisfaction is important, as well as creating an environment where people want to come to work every day. He talked about the importance of medical benefits and said there's an opportunity to recruit people at the end of their career who want to complete their Public Employees' Retirement System (PERS).

[9:03:40 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked about major issues specific to rural and Southeast Alaska that could come before the RCA.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSTON answered submarine cables and the cost of transmission.

[9:05:48 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked how much time is spent by commissioners on reviewing rates versus agency management.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSTON said the chair spends an incredible amount of time on agency administration. The remaining commissioners spend most of their time on issues brought before the RCA, reading testimony, and public hearings.

[9:07:20 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS expressed concern about the RCA's ability to look at long term plans and take a holistic view of larger energy issues particularly along the Railbelt.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSTON acknowledged that the RCA is reactive, but also tries to be forward looking. He shared his belief that the legislature created the Railbelt Reliability Council (RRC) and the Railbelt Transmission Organization (RTO) to have a more forward-looking perspective on standards for the utilities. The RCA is working with those agencies, along with the utilities, to ensure that the focus is on a long-term horizon.

CO-CHAIR MEARS asked about the dynamic between the RRC, the RTO, and the RCA.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSTON said the RCA has an ex officio role on the RRC and would review the standards and surcharges it assesses to the utilities. In addition, the RCA certifies the RTO as fit, willing, and able and requests frequent updates during public meetings.

[9:14:29 AM](#)

STEVEN DEVRIES, Commissioner Appointee, Regulatory Commission of Alaska (RCA), Department of Commerce, Community & Economic Development (DCCED), spoke to his personal and professional background and highlighted his qualifications under AS 42.04.020(b)(3). He listed his work experience as shown on his resume [included in the committee packet] and said it's a great honor to be considered.

[9:18:29 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked about the proportion of engineers to attorneys in the RCA.

COMMISSIONER DEVRIES responded it's a combination of both and detailed the breakdown of staff.

[9:21:41 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND asked for Commissioner Devries's experience as it relates to rural utility work.

COMMISSIONER DEVRIES noted his tenure with the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation (AHFC) and its Public Housing Division where he gained perspective on rural utilities. He added that in consideration of Cost of Power Adjustments (COPA) and Power Cost Equalization (PCE) levels, the commissioners deal with impacts to rural communities and utilities on a weekly basis.

[9:24:43 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS asked whether the RRC provides presentations to the RCA.

COMMISSIONER DEVRIES said the RRC is working on reliability standards and would be presenting them to the RCA for review.

[9:27:58 AM](#)

JOHN SPRINGSTEEN, Commissioner Appointee, Regulatory Commission of Alaska (RCA), Department of Commerce, Community & Economic Development (DCCED), spoke to his personal and professional background and highlighted his qualifications under AS 42.04.020(b)(3). He listed his work experience as shown on his resume [included in the committee packet].

CO-CHAIR MEARS pointed out that Alaska is facing resource limitations and must be thoughtful on how it moves forward on energy supply without causing too much cost impact to consumers. She acknowledged that the integrated resource plan is forthcoming, but in the meantime, asked whether there is an urgency for the RCA to address these issues.

COMMISSIONER SPRINGSTEEN said there is certainly urgency among the RCA and the utilities to solve the problem and address the natural gas limitations that faces the state. He said the commission continues to use its convening power to bring people

in an discuss future plans. In response to a follow up question from Co-Chair Mears, he said the RCA has the ability to bring utilities in to discuss curtailment plans and is working within its given toolkit.

[9:38:11 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX inquired as to the difference in function between the RCA and Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority (AIDEA).

COMMISSIONER SPRINGSTEEN responded the RCA is a quasi-judicial organization.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked about opportunities to reduce the expense of RCA compliance.

COMMISSIONER SPRINGSTEEN said the RCA is not here to create unnecessary cost or obstacles. With regard to important proceedings on material matters, he said most commissioners would hope that the parties come to a mutual agreement amongst themselves and bring that decision to the RCA.

[9:41:48 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT sought to better understand Commissioner Springsteen's role in a sole source contract with Cypress Wealth Services for \$440 million and how Alaska benefited from that 2019 investment.

COMMISSIONER SPRINGSTEEN said that decision was made by AIDEA's executive director, Tom Boutin.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT shared her understanding that Commissioner Springsteen was involved in the supervision of that contract and asked how it served Alaska's public interest.

COMMISSIONER SPRINGSTEEN clarified that he did have a direct supervisory role in the contract. He said he was a member of an Alaska development team that included Clark Penney of Cypress Wealth Services on an effort to bolster existing economic engines, remove unnecessary obstacles, and attract investment.

[9:44:57 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked if there were an opportunity to award a contract of \$440 million in the future, how hard Commissioner

Springsteen would work to ensure that it's put out to bid to give Alaskans an opportunity at that contract.

COMMISSIONER SPRINGSTEEN said he follows state procurement code.

[9:47:02 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HALL asked Commissioner Springsteen about his transition from AIDEA to DCCED.

COMMISSIONER SPRINGSTEEN recalled that when he was a chief operating officer at AIDEA, he was seconded to DCCED to work on the economic engine development and then hired as deputy commissioner in April 2019.

[9:49:03 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND asked why the commissioner would want to move into a more restricted regulatory role given his development background and asked about his accomplishments on the Alaska development team.

COMMISSIONER SPRINGSTEEN said the Alaska development team prepared the 2022-2027 comprehensive economic development strategy for the state on the shoulders of Scott Goldsmith's work on the three legs of the Alaska economy: federal funding, oil and gas, and all other sectors. Regarding his transition to the RCA, he spoke to his ability to determine whether a party is fit, willing, and able given the various roles he's filled in the past.

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND asked how to promote conservation of resources in looking at rate cases.

COMMISSIONER SPRINGSTEEN said the RCA sits in a reactive role while also being forward thinking on new approaches. He said it's great to receive information on new approaches from the utilities and have discussions on the backend to ensure that they would not cause harm to ratepayers. He acknowledged the challenges with the integration of different types of power in the Railbelt. In looking at different generation sources, he said he considers intermittency, seasonality, and distance, and how to work with a utility that has an obligation to provide safe, reliable, cost-effective power.

CO-CHAIR MEARS said she would like to see a more generous interpretation of statute to allow the RCA the ability to look more deeply at these issues.

[9:56:32 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HALL referenced a letter of recommendation from U.S. Senator Murkowski [included in the committee packet] and inquired as to the relationship between she and the commissioner.

COMMISSIONER SPRINGSTEEN said he is a constituent and appreciates her leadership.

[9:57:25 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS opened public testimony on the appointees to the RCA. After ascertaining that no one wished to testify, she closed public testimony.

[9:59:03 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS moved to advance the confirmations of Mark Johnston, Steven Devries, and John Springsteen, appointees to the Regulatory Commission of Alaska, to the joint session of the House and Senate for consideration. She reminded members that signing the reports regarding appointment to boards and commissions in no way reflects in individual members' approval or disapproval of the appointees, and that the nominations are merely forwarded to the full legislature for confirmation or rejection. There being no objection, the confirmations were advanced.

[9:59:33 AM](#)

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:59 a.m.