

**HJR**

**68**

# FISCAL NOTE

STATE OF ALASKA  
1998 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

BILL NO. HJR 68

Title: Continue Operation of McKinley Park Airstrip  
 Sponsor: House Finance  
 Requestor: House Transportation

Dept. Affected: Legislature  
 BRU: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Components: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Serial #: \_\_\_\_\_

**EXPENDITURES/REVENUES: (THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS)**

OPERATING	FY 99	FY 00	FY 01	FY 02	FY 03	FY 04
Personal Services	0.0					
Travel	0.0					
Contractual	0.0					
Supplies	0.0					
Equipment	0.0					
Land & Structures	0.0					
Grants, Claims	0.0					
Miscellaneous	0.0					
<b>TOTAL OPERATING</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>0.0</b>

CAPITAL	0.0					
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REVENUE	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
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**FUNDING: (THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS)**

General Fund	0.0					
Federal Fund	0.0					
Other	0.0					
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>0.0</b>

**POSITIONS:**

Full-Time	0					
Part-Time	0					
Temporary	0					

**ANALYSIS: (ATTACH A SEPARATE PAGE IF NECESSARY)**

Prepared by: Peter Ecklund, Staff  
House Transportation Committee  
 \_\_\_\_\_, Chairman

Date: 4/30/98  
 Phone: 465-3424  
 Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

**McKinley Park Airstrip Status      April 11, 1998**  
**-Tom George, Alaskan Aviation Safety Foundation**

Last fall the Alaskan Aviation Safety Foundation learned that the NPS was planning to close the McKinley Park Airstrip.

The closure is one of the results of a Development Concept Plan/Environmental Impact Statement focused on the Frontcountry of Denali National Park, developed over the 1995-96 time frame.

Closing the airstrip is just one element of the plan to change the Park Entrance area. Other changes over a period of years are to close the Park Hotel, and expand the visitor center support, etc.

Closure of the airstrip was buried in one of the a EIS alternatives which included a general reduction of facilities. This alternative was not otherwise selected. At the last minute, closing the airstrip apparently moved to the "preferred" alternative reflected in the Record Of Decision released in Feb 97.

It is not exactly clear to what extent NPS included aviation interests in the process, although some businesses were included.

Issues:

Safety of VFR travel through the Windy Pass between Anchorage and Fairbanks.

- Windy Pass is a heavily traveled route between South Central and the Interior
- Poor weather is often on either end of the pass (Healy, Cantwell).
- McKinley Park is the only public strip in the mountains (Denali is private). While the Denali strip or the highway could be used to land an aircraft in the event of an engine failure, having a public airstrip as an alternative to pushing ahead in bad weather is important to safety.
- Automated weather is available at the McKinley Park airstrip, providing pilots some advance information to use for flight planning and operational decision making.

Public access to Denali National Park

- The McKinley Park airstrip allows the public to fly to within walking distance of visitor facilities, camping, shuttle bus access.
- it is used by Alaskans and visitors from across the nation who fly to Alaska.
- NPS has apparently already moved commercial operations off the strip.
- The nearest public strip is Healy, which lacks services, and frequently experiences bad wind conditions.

The NPS current position is that they won't close McKinley Park until a "suitable alternative" has been found.

The Greater Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce and the Fairbanks North Star Borough have passed resolutions opposing the plan to close the airstrip. A committee has been formed within AASF to address this issue. AOPA opposes this closure, and is willing to support an effort to keep the airstrip open. Alliances with other aviation organizations are being sought to address the requirements of a "suitable alternative" airport as proposed by the Park Service. The AASF and Alaska Airmen's Association are urging their members to write the Park Service expressing their opinion on this topic.



Greater Fairbanks **Chamber** of Commerce

250 Cushman Street, Suite 2D  
Fairbanks, Alaska 99701-4055

907 452 1100  
FAX (907) 456-6968

Introduced by: Transportation Committee  
Date Introduced: January 19, 1998  
Dated Passed: January 26, 1998  
Date Transmitted: January 28, 1998

**RESOLUTION 98-0126**

**A RESOLUTION BY THE GREATER FAIRBANKS CHAMBER OF  
COMMERCE IN SUPPORT OF KEEPING THE MCKINLEY NATIONAL  
PARK AIRSTRIP OPEN FOR GENERAL AVIATION USE.**

**WHEREAS**, Denali National Park and Preserve (Denali Park) is the top visitor destination in Alaska and a critical element in the Alaska visitor/tourism industry and access into Denali Park is extremely restricted due to the limited existing transportation infrastructure; and

**WHEREAS**, visiting Denali Park is a high priority for many Alaskan citizens and many of the Alaskan visitors who fly their personal aircraft to Alaska; and

**WHEREAS**, the McKinley National Park airstrip (McKinley airstrip) has served public aviation users since it was constructed in the early 1940's; and

**WHEREAS**, the McKinley airstrip offers intermodal connections such as access to the National Park entrance area by foot, and direct convenient access to the Alaska Railroad and the Parks system of surface transportation; and

**WHEREAS**, the McKinley airstrip as a public airport facility operates well as a multi-nodal transfer point, and

**WHEREAS**, the McKinley airstrip AWOS supplies invaluable weather information to pilots traveling through Windy Pass, and the airstrip provides an emergency landing area in otherwise forbidding terrain in the event a pilot experiences bad weather conditions, or mechanical problems with their aircraft; and

**WHEREAS**, the closest public alternative, the Healy River Airport, has limited space available for transient aircraft, limited transient service facilities, is 10 miles from the entrance to Denali Park, and often experiences severe winds that pose a flying hazard; and

**CHAMBER BENEFACTORS**

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**WHEREAS**, the Denali Landing Strip is 8 miles south from the entrance to Denali Park, operates only as a private airstrip; and is not open for public use; and

**WHEREAS**, the potential closure of the McKinley airstrip was not included as part of the proposed alternative in the Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan (Frontcountry Plan) during public hearings in 1996, and this action has therefore not received the benefit of proper public scrutiny and review; and

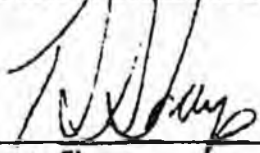
**WHEREAS**, the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities' Planning Section has determined that closure of the McKinley airstrip is not recommended at this time.

**NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED** that the Greater Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce urges the National Park Service to reconsider and reverse its decision to close the McKinley National Park Airstrip and keep it open to citizens and available to fulfill its' very important function for general aviation and visitor convenience.

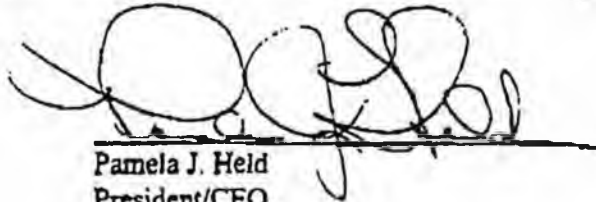
**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that this resolution be distributed to:

Steve Martin, Superintendent, Denali National Park and Preserve  
Bruce Babbitt, Secretary, U.S. Department of the Interior  
Senator Ted Stevens  
Senator Frank Murkowski  
Representative Don Young  
The Honorable Tony Knowles, Governor of the State of Alaska  
Alaska State Legislature  
Alaska State Chamber of Commerce  
The Fairbanks Convention and Visitors Bureau  
The Alaska Airmen's Association

PASSED in Fairbanks, Alaska this 26th Day of January 1998 by the Greater Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors.



Therese Sharp  
Chairwoman of the Board



Pamela J. Held  
President/CEO

By: Mike Young  
Introduced: 03/26/98  
Adopted: 03/26/98

RESOLUTION NO. 98-023

A RESOLUTION OPPOSING THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE'S DECISION TO  
CLOSE THE MCKINLEY PARK AIRSTRIP

WHEREAS, the National Park Service (NPS) has determined in their current Frontcountry Plan that the McKinley Park Airstrip should be closed; and

WHEREAS, the NPS suggested five alternatives in their original draft plan and only one alternative suggested that the McKinley Park Airstrip be closed (Alternative C), one alternative (Alternative E) called for expansion of the current airstrip and Alternatives A and B maintained the existing airstrip; and

WHEREAS, the NPS also determined in this plan that the McKinley Park Airstrip will remain open until suitable alternatives become available; and

WHEREAS, Fairbanks residents and pilots use the McKinley Park Airstrip for immediate access to Denali National Park; and

WHEREAS, the other two airstrips in the area are not as convenient or as accessible to Denali National Park and do not qualify as suitable alternatives; the Healy Airport is located approximately 10 miles away and is owned by the State of Alaska; the Denali Private Airstrip is owned privately and is also approximately 10 miles away; and

WHEREAS, the NPS owns the McKinley Park Airstrip and it would appear to be more economical to continue operations there than to close the airstrip and pay to use either the Denali Private Airstrip or the Healy Airport; and

WHEREAS, the NPS needs both wheel-plane and ski-plane access for its operations and neither the Healy Airport or the Denali Private Airstrip currently allow access for planes to land on snow; in the winter the NPS flies Piper Cubs which only have skis and need snow access to land; and currently those planes are able to land at the McKinley Park Airstrip.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Fairbanks North Star Borough Assembly opposes the closure of the McKinley Park Airstrip and requests the NPS to either keep the airstrip open indefinitely or build another airstrip within the Park, which would allow pilots and other visitors closer access to existing Park facilities.

PASSED AND APPROVED THIS 26TH DAY OF MARCH, 1998.

*Hank Bartos*

Hank Bartos  
Presiding Officer

ATTEST:

*Mona Lisa Drexler, CMC/AAE*

Mona Lisa Drexler, CMC/AAE  
Municipal Borough Clerk

Ayes: LaSota, Sattley, Solie, Sonaf Frank, Prax, Webb, Young, McBride, Bartos  
Noes: None

Post-It Fax Note	7671	DATE	12/9/97	10:00 AM	2
To	Don Lowell	From			
Co. Dept.	Alaska DOT	Co.	NPS - Denali		
Phone #	951-2325	Phone #	683-9552		
Fax #	951-2313	Fax #	683-9639		

Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
Briefing Statement

(7)

October 7, 1997

**Region/Park:** Alaska Region/Denali National Park and Preserve

**Project/Issue:** Closing McKinley Park Airstrip

**Background:** The McKinley Park Airstrip was constructed with National Park Service funds. It is owned by the U.S. Government and is maintained by Denali National Park staff. The Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan (Frontcountry Plan), for which the record of decision was signed in February 1997, calls for closing the park airstrip to provide for potential expansion of the railroad depot and also to reduce the overall level of resource impacts in the entrance area. The possibility of closing the airstrip was discussed during public scoping for the plan in summer and fall 1995, and it was part of one alternative of the draft plan that was available for public review from June 21 through August 19, 1996. Public meetings were also held at various locations throughout Alaska between August 5 and 14, 1996. Only a small percentage of public comments addressed the airstrip. Several substantive comments were received on the overall level of resource impacts in the entrance area, raising the issue of using the airstrip location for other functions or rehabilitating the area after removal.

**Current Status:** The National Park Service is planning to phase out use of the McKinley Park airstrip as other options for air access to the park are identified. The Healy Airport and the Denali Private Airstrip are both within 10 air miles and are being considered for future NPS operations. The Healy Airport is paved and is available for commercial use and general aviation. The Denali Private Airstrip is used mainly for flightseeing operations but is also available for emergency use, and at 5000 feet it is substantially longer than either of the other two in the area.

The McKinley Park airstrip will remain open for NPS and general aviation use until suitable alternatives become available. Flightseeing operations are no longer based at the airstrip and remaining commercial use will be phased out in the next two years in keeping with the direction in the frontcountry plan. Suitable alternatives for flightseeing and commercial use are currently available at the Healy and Denali Private airstrips.

**Service Position:** The NPS believes that the Frontcountry Plan provides for an even better visitor experience, increased visitor access, and improved resource protection, and the park is working to implement the highest priority items, including airstrip closure. Because of concerns that have been raised, the NPS is also working to ensure that

acceptable alternatives exist for those visitors wishing to travel to Denali National Park by aircraft.

**Position of Other Interested Parties:** During August and September 1997, the park received approximately 15-20 comments by telephone and letter opposing closure of the McKinley Park Airstrip. The primary issues raised have been that the airstrip is needed for continued access to the park and for an additional margin of safety for private pilots. Groups expressing opposition have included the Alaska Air Carriers Association, the Alaska Aviation Safety Foundation, and the Alaska Ninety-Nines.

*Also more recently: Alaska Airman's Association*

Contact: Stephen P. Martin, Superintendent, Denali National Park and Preserve (907) 683-2294

*or Mike Tranel  
653-9552*

*\* up to 30-40 comments  
by Dec 8.*



## FAIRBANKS INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Airport Marketing • 6450 Airport Way • Fairbanks, Alaska 99709 • Phone: (907) 479-8700 • Fax: (907) 479-7090 • SITA: FAIAPXH

January 21, 1998

Mr. Robert Stanton  
Director of National Park Services  
National Park Service  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Mr. Stanton,

I am writing to express my concern and dismay over the National Park Service's decision to close the McKinley Park Airstrip.

I only learned of the airstrip's possible closure as a rumor last August. Now, having read the October 7, 1997, Briefing Statement by Park Superintendent Mr. Stephen P. Martin (copy enclosed), I see the closure was a "done deal" as of the February, 1997, signing of a record of decision.

Through my job and personal interests I keep up to date on general aviation-related issues in Alaska. To my knowledge the NPS did not make any substantive effort to inform the State's aviation community (or the general public) of the airstrip's possible closure in the course of your agency's solicitation of public comment on the Frontcountry Plan. This failure to communicate to affected users via any of several readily available media (e.g., direct mail to licensed Alaskan pilots, news releases or display ads in the Alaska Flyer, the Alaska Airmen's Association Newsletter, or AOPA Pilot, etc.) should in itself warrant a review of your decision.

Indeed, if you had genuinely solicited the flying (and non-flying) public's perspective you would have heard unanimous opposition to the closing the airstrip. I do not know of anyone, inside or outside the aviation community, who supports the airstrip's closure.

Nevertheless, closing the current McKinley Park Airstrip would be acceptable when "suitable alternatives," as noted in Mr. Martin's Briefing Statement, become available. If indeed the current airstrip is needed, as he stated, "for potential expansion of the railroad depot" [despite being on the "wrong" side of the tracks], a new NPS-constructed replacement airstrip in the same immediate area would amply meet all general aviation safety and access needs.

A key criterion for any "suitable alternative" is a reasonable walking distance (a mile or less) from the airstrip to the park entrance facilities and attractions (Visitor Reception Center, park hotel and restaurants, nature and other hiking trails such as Horseshoe Lake and Mt. Healy, etc.). On a personal note, our family has enjoyed innumerable day trips by air from Fairbanks to the park - in our experience, it's the best wheeled aircraft-accessible excursion in Alaska, and we would be very sorry to lose Frontcountry air access to the park.

*A cooperative program with the Fairbanks International Airport*

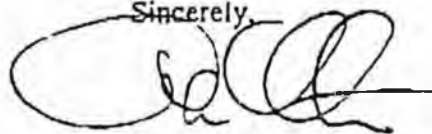
Mr. Robert Stanton  
January 21, 1998  
Page 2 of 2

In this regard, neither the Healy nor Denali Private airstrips qualify as a "suitable alternative" for general aviation access to the park. The Denali Private airstrip is off-limits to the general public, and the Healy airstrip is about ten miles from the park entrance and thus well beyond walking distance.

Finally, how does the NPS reconcile its stated Frontcountry Plan objective, by Mr. Martin's report, of "increased visitor access" with "working to implement the highest priority items, including airstrip closure"? Obviously, the airstrip's closure will decrease, not increase, visitor access.

I trust you and your staff will see fit to reconsider your decision, this time with meaningful aviation user input, on the future of the McKinley Park airstrip.

Sincerely,



Dave Carlstrom  
Director of Airport Marketing

cc: The Honorable Ted Stevens, U.S. Senator  
The Honorable Frank Murkowski, U.S. Senator  
The Honorable Don Young, U.S. Congressman  
The Honorable Tony Knowles, Governor, State of Alaska  
Mr. Phil Boyer, President, AOPA  
Ms. Dee Hanson, Executive Director, Alaska Airmen's Association  
Mr. Tom George, Alaskan Aviation Safety Foundation  
Ms. Pam Held, President & CEO, Greater Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce  
Ms. Sheila Romero, Executive Director, Fairbanks Convention and Visitors Bureau  
Mr. Bruce Babbitt, Secretary, U. S. Department of the Interior  
Mr. Stephen P. Martin, Park Superintendent, Denali National Park

Encl.



September 16, 1997

Mr. Robert D. Barbee  
Alaska Regional Director  
National Park Service  
2525 Gambell Street  
Anchorage, AK 9950

Dear Barbee:

In the interest of public convenience and safety this organization requests reconsideration of the recommendation to close the airport at the McKinley Park Hotel site.

This airport is very strategically located between Cantwell and Healy, the two places where adverse weather frequently occurs for low level flights through Windy Pass, one of Alaska's busiest flyways for small airplanes. The airport has served the National Park Service and the public very well for more than fifty years.

I have flown very high-level foreign government officials to the Park several times at the service of the U.S. State Department. These people include the Vice Premier of South Korea and the West German equivalent of our Department of Interior Secretary, in addition to several members of the U. S. Senate and Congress. The U.S. public includes many pilots (some of whom are very influential persons) who come to and tour Alaska in personally owned aircraft. No convenient public transportation is available or affordable from Cantwell or Healy. Flying tours of the Park are the only practical way for severely handicapped visitors to enjoy the beauty of this unique Parkland.

The significance of the airport to the Alaska Railroad is difficult to quantify but I have personally flown the Trackmaster and Railroad Manager to the Park airport to help in emergency derailment instances where rail or highway travel was not timely.

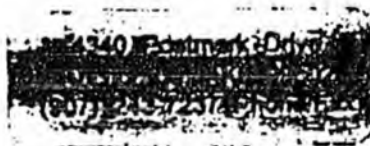
The small amount of labor and material required to maintain this airport is surely repaid in the public interest of aviation safety, for medical evacuation of staff or visitors, and convenience of that portion of the visiting population who are handicapped and unable to enjoy the hiking or bus tours available there.

Sincerely,

*Thomas H. Wardleigh*

Thomas H. Wardleigh, Chairman  
Board of Directors

cc: Rabbitt, Williams, Sen. Stevens, Sen. Murkowski  
Congressman Young, Steve Martin/Denali Park, AOPA.





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COPY FOR YOUR  
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AASE

7 (3)

September 25, 1997

Mr Robert D. Barbec  
Alaska Regional Director  
National Park Service  
2535 Gambell Street  
Anchorage, AK 99503

Dear Mr. Barbec:

The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) represents the general aviation interests of more than 340,000 individual pilots and aircraft owners in the United States, more than 4,200 of whom reside in the state of Alaska. The organization provides advocacy for the betterment of the general aviation industry including accessibility to airports where general aviation operators will be a primary beneficiary.

It is our understanding that there have been recommendations to close the airport at the McKinley Park Hotel site. AOPA strongly opposes the closure of that facility.

As you well know, Alaska's operational conditions are not the same as the conditions found in the rest of the continental United States. Weather and terrain are major considerations in flying in Alaska. In the case of the McKinley Park Airport, the issue is even more important because of the scarcity of landing facilities in that area.

The importance of this airport, besides being a part of the local transportation system and being beneficial to the local area, is accentuated by safety. The McKinley Airport is a "safety net" for aircraft that encountered unforeseen weather in that area. Furthermore, the difficult accessibility of the area by other means not only justifies but requires an airport in case of emergencies and medical evacuations.

We urge you to actively pursue other options in coordination and cooperation with the users in an attempt to insure that the facility is given due process and consideration.

Should you require any additional information on this or any other related issue, please feel free to contact me at (301) 695-2206. Thank you for your consideration of our views.

Sincerely,

Miguel Vasconcelos  
Director  
Regional Affairs



**ALASKA AIR CARRIERS ASSOCIATION**

1117 E. 35th Avenue, Suite 102  
Anchorage, Alaska 99508  
(907) 277-0071 Fax (907) 277-0072

October 8, 1997

Mr. Robert D. Barbee  
Alaska Regional Director  
National Park Service  
2525 Gambell Street  
Anchorage, Alaska 99501

Re: McKinley Park Airstrip

Dear Mr. Barbee,

It has recently come to the attention of the Alaska Air Carriers Association that the National Park Service is considering closure of the airport at the McKinley Park Hotel site. AACGA supports the position of the Alaskan Aviation Safety Foundation, and agrees that closure of this strip is of immense concern to the Alaska aviation community due to the important public safety role this particular airstrip provides.

AACGA represents more than 100 air carriers operating in Alaska, and as such, is often in alliance with other aviation user groups in our quest to provide the safest and most viable aviation environment for aviators to operate in. As the Alaskan Aviation Safety Foundation aptly stated in correspondence to you on Sept. 9, 1997, "...this airport is very strategically located between Cantwell and Healy, the two places where adverse weather frequently occurs for low level flights through Windy Pass, one of Alaska's busiest flyways for small airplanes." In the interest of safety, that reason alone is certainly justification enough to reconsider closure of the airstrip. Furthermore, considering the roles the McKinley airstrip plays in medevac operations, the airstrip's use as an alternate airport for aviation emergencies, and increasing the accessibility of the Park for severely handicapped visitors, it seems closure of the McKinley airstrip is unthinkable.

*FYI  
Sunny* (4)

*[Faint, illegible text, likely a routing slip or administrative notes]*

Mr. Robert D. Barbee  
National Park Service  
Oct. 8, 1997 page two

The diverse and rugged geographic nature of Alaska and the adverse weather conditions found in this state provide enough of an unforgiving environment for aviators to operate in—we don't need to take away the few established safety nets the aviation community depends upon.

Sincerely,



Kimberly S. Ross  
Executive Director

cc: Senator Ted Stevens  
Senator Frank Murkowski  
Congressman Don Young  
Federal Aviation Administration  
National Transportation Safety Board  
Alaskan Aviation Safety Foundation  
Alaska Pilots Association  
Alaska Almen's Association  
AACA Board of Directors