

Correspondence



RABBIT CREEK COMMUNITY COUNCIL (RCCC) A Forum for Respectful Communication & Community Relations



1057 West Fireweed Lane, Suite 100 / Anchorage, AK 99503

January 4, 2024

Dear Safer Seward Highway Team –

We continue to appreciate being part of the Safer Seward Highway (SSH) Stakeholder Working Group (WG). At the December 14, 2023, meeting of the Rabbit Creek Community Council (RCCC) we discussed information from the December 2023 public open house in Anchorage which several of our members attended, and continuing information and discussions from which we have benefitted as members of the SWG. Our Land Use and Transportation Committee has had focused discussions on this project. These discussions reveal that RCCC residents have emerging concerns and preferences; and they also have a number of questions and concerns that require further information and data.

Following is a compilation of comments and questions on the safety, need, and preliminary three- and four-lane design concepts for Seward Highway Reconstruction from MP 98.5 to 118.5, Bird Flats to Rabbit Creek, based on currently available information and RCCC discussions about the SSH project. While we provided much of this information in a December 8, 2023, letter to the SSH Team, we wanted to make sure these comments were part of the record for your current comment period ending today, January 4, 2024.

Specific to Potter Marsh and Potter Valley Road

Based on the preliminary concepts, RCCC has two general comments:

- A. A three-lane, 55 mph design at Potter Marsh appears safer, with better control of traffic movements and speeds, than a four-lane divided design. Slower speeds are also compatible with the concentrated recreation use and wildlife habitat values of Potter Marsh.
- B. Regarding the separated multi-use pathway throughout the project corridor, RCCC urges that the design emphasize maximum separation from traffic for the safety and perceived safety of non-motorized users. People will use it only if the pathway feels safe and comfortable. A recent report documented how much less safe pedestrians in the United States are than pedestrians in Japan, Europe, and many other areas around the world (<https://theworld.org/media/2024-01-04/pedestrian-deaths-rise-us-look-solutions-abroad>). Higher speeds and less pedestrian-centric walkways are among leading reasons for the higher fatalities and injuries of pedestrians in the U.S. as compared to other countries.

Specific comments:

1. Noise information at Potter Marsh

RCCC is concerned about the noise impacts to neighborhoods and to the marsh.

- a. Provide noise maps for several potential traffic speeds. What are the calculated decibels at various distances where the Highway passes Potter Marsh, south to Potter Weigh station?

- b. Provide information on the decibels and disturbance caused by the intermittent noise of rumble strips.
 - c. What noise abatement features are possible for the Potter Marsh area and other communities and high-value recreation spots along the highway?
2. Lighting along Potter Marsh and at Potter Valley Road intersection
RCCC residents value the night sky and the natural lighting that plays across Potter Marsh. In addition, Potter Marsh is within the Anchorage Coastal Wildlife Refuge. Residents would like to avoid the very tall light posts that create a large area of glare visible from miles away, such as exist at the Old Seward Highway overpass and other intersections.

Can the team share several lighting options that do not create upward light pollution or large areas of glare?

3. Explain the turning movements and wait times at Potter Marsh under the various designs.
- a. The four-lane divided seems to rely on cars eddying out in the median. This does not seem safe or practical.
 - b. The four-lane divided option as shown lacks turn pockets. Wouldn't the design effectively require turn pockets, and thus amount to six lanes?
 - c. The concept of an inside merging lane with 65 mph traffic is unfamiliar and appears unsafe.
4. Provide detailed traffic data on the current and projected flows of traffic at Potter Valley Road, both for the highway and Potter Valley Road
- a. Add the proposed Potter Marsh Watershed Park as a new destination that will increase traffic at the Potter Valley Road intersection.
 - b. Consider traffic from a future alpine trailhead to Chugach State Park (as depicted on the Chugach State Park access inventory). Based on the use of Glen Alps and Upper Canyon roads, this could be 1,000 additional vehicle trips or more on summer days.
5. Traffic counts and projections for travel on Old Seward Highway
Residents want to know the spill-over effects onto the Old Seward Highway east of Potter Marsh, anticipated because of the possible delays and safety perceptions at the Seward Highway intersection, as well as the possible new access patterns for a Turnagain Arm Trail parking lot and Potter Marsh Watershed Park.
6. Frontage road for access to Turnagain Arm Trail trailhead
- a. This is currently shown as a four-way intersection that aligns with Old Seward Highway. This appears unsafe because that intersection already has poor sight lines and a difficult stopping situation for downhill traffic on Potter Valley Road. If a frontage road is proposed, it should intersect farther west, at the westerly pull-out of the South Potter Marsh parking lot. This is where people on foot would want to walk if they parked at Potter Marsh and then walked to the trailhead.
 - b. The frontage road would need a separated pathway. It would be used for pedestrian access to the trailhead.
7. Consider a one-way overpass ramp at Potter Valley Road

This could provide safer and faster merging onto the Seward Highway heading south, and preclude the need for a larger footprint with a separated median.

8. Mitigation options for impacts along Potter Marsh and Potter Valley Road

While mitigation may not be part of current project planning, it is never too early to start a list of options. We recommend consideration be given to using flashing lights to help control speeds in the Potter Valley Road/Old Seward Highway area and addition of a pedestrian path along Old Seward Highway from Potter Valley Road to at least the pump house. This could also provide a loop, tying into Potter Marsh Watershed Park.

Highway footprint questions

1. Visual depiction of cut and fill, with comparisons to the existing rock wall near Bird Creek.

More visuals are needed for the public to understand the scale of changes to the landscape. We suggest three-dimensional graphics of the cut and fill, as well as numerical height comparisons of the cliff faces. The website has road-level photos that might serve as the basis for this. This arises from the alarm of some of our residents at the scale of cut and fill that detracts from the scenic natural setting. That loss appears to include the loss of almost all natural shoreline.

2. What determines the amount of quarrying: rockfall safety, or materials source?

- What sections have or should be analyzed for shed-roof-style rockfall protection or tunneling?
- To minimize quarrying, what are the options for a combination of rock removal and rock catchment?

3. Decking or stacking

What analysis was made of sections of stacked highway to reduce the footprint? This is common on bridges and in some cities. If none, can this be a partial solution to reduce the footprint?

4. Railroad in the median; railroad for future passenger travel

- Given the scale of this project, RCCC would like the footprint to at least leave open the option for future passenger rail. Given the imperative to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from transportation, and the goals of more accessible and equitable transportation, this project should consider future use of the railroad for passengers.
- This may affect the alignment of the railroad at several points, such as Potter Valley and Indian or Bird.
- Bureaucratic turf battles aside, could the railroad be located between the highway lanes. Rail lines are located in a highway median in many urban areas, such as Portland (The Max), the L in Chicago, and in Los Angeles.

5. Sea-level rise and storm conditions from human-caused climate change

What is the level of fill and the relation to sea level; plus the range of projections for sea level rise. Regarding the rate of isostatic rebound—what scientific evidence is there that uplift will match sea-level rise?

Safety and Need comments and questions

1. Transparency and accountability: Who decides the worthiness of this nearly \$1 billion dollar project, and according to what criteria?

Our Council residents would like transparency and public participation in the evaluation of this project's benefits compared to other transportation investments. Where are the safety needs greatest? Is

the risk per vehicle mile traveled greater on this corridor than on other corridors? Show the data compared to other hazardous highways and urban roads. Also, how are tourism and freight benefits calculated for this project? Recognizing that the SSH Team is focused on this and not other projects, can you provide information on the decision-making process and avenues for the public to ensure there are broader discussions and consideration of the tradeoffs in determining where it is best to spend up to \$1 billion in public transportation funds in Alaska?

2. Provide the formulas that show the statistical trade-off between speed-related risk and sight-line related risk

Long sightlines help drivers avoid some crashes, but long sightlines allow and encourage higher speeds. Speed results in more crashes, and higher severity crashes. For the public to think that a design increases safety, the public needs to know the cause-and-effect statistical relationships of speed and sightlines and crashes.

3. What and who determines speed limits?

A project engineer told one of us: "The speed limit is a function of traffic mixing and merging, not the sightlines on the curves." We need to hear more about this. If traffic mixing is the guiding factor, is mixing and merging more controlled by four lanes or three lanes or two lanes? This is not intuitive, because four lanes allow more lane-changing.

4. Explain the Safety Corridor Study crash data—specific crash causes

Crashes went down when the Safety Corridor was declared in 2006. But crashes have increased since then, especially in winter. The Corridor study attributes some amount of crash increases to low staffing (troopers) and to limits on winter maintenance. Quantify the crashes by underlying cause.

5. What was the crash rate in the slow-speed zones of the rockfall projects, where jersey barriers were used in 2022-2023?

6. Comparative fatality rate for this highway and other roadways and intersections

How does the fatality rate compare to other highways and intersections in the region? For example, if the accident rate is 1 fatality per 800,000 trips at Indian (please provide the actual rate), what is the comparison for various other fatality patterns, such as on the Sterling Highway or on urban arterials in Anchorage?

Cost burden and Affordability questions

1. What is the total increase in lane miles and maintenance surface

This should be provided for a divided-four lane, versus three-lane, versus two-lane options. It should include access roads and pullouts.

2. What are total maintenance cost estimates for this project? Provide a comparison of future costs for divided four-lane, three-lane, and two-lane. How does this compare to current costs for this stretch of highway?

3. Provide a picture of DOTPF maintenance funding levels relative to maintenance needs, historically and currently.

4. What projections do DOTPF Maintenance Managers have regarding future funding adequacy for maintenance of this project, given regionwide needs? Could mitigation include guaranteed maintenance funding to ensure safety gains are maintained?
5. What has been the budget and hours logged for law enforcement on the Seward Highway from Potter to Girdwood over the years? How has this varied, and what percentage of the agency budget is this? Quantify the amount of time for traffic patrolling on the highway, to give an indication of enforcement capability.

Opportunity Costs

1. Is a no-build alternative still in the analysis? If not, why not?
2. Given the \$800 million price tag (or more), who and how is it decided that this project is the best investment in Alaska's future?

3. Provide a menu of the alternatives for the public

Our residents have lots of questions on the scale and the return on investment for this project, versus the opportunity cost. There are so many needs for Alaska transportation funds; and Alaskans must build infrastructure for a very different future than we see today. We would like a menu of other projects that are in the AMATS Metropolitan Transportation Plan, the municipal plans, or DOTPF's plans, that could be funded if this project did not expend \$800 million in the next 5 years. Additionally, our residents have ideas for new projects that might not be in current adopted plans but that offer big economic, environmental and land use payoffs:

- Connectivity to geo-thermal energy sources along western Cook Inlet?
- A railroad link to Canada
- Commuter rail to the Mat-Su or Girdwood
- A suite of ten, \$80 million projects in Anchorage instead of one \$800 million project (if SSH is no-build)
- A suite of ten, \$40 million-dollar projects in Anchorage (if this SSH were half the scale)
- What about segmenting and phasing this \$800 million project out over 10 or more years, so other projects in Anchorage can also leap ahead and spur economic recovery?

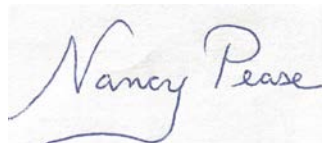
We recognize that the SSH Team does not have the authority to consider these other options but would appreciate any assistance you can provide us in raising these options with the appropriate decision makers.

Thank you for your attention to these questions and comments. We look forward to sitting down to discuss them with you early next week.

Sincerely,



Co-chair, RCCC



Co-chair, Land Use & Transportation Comm