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Nordic skiing priority proposed for Hatcher Pass

ALPINE ON HOLD: Funds could be used to build road.

By RINDI WHITE
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PALMER -- A long-discussed ski area in Hatcher Pass might involve only nordic ski trails in the near future, with alpine development on hold until more money is available.

The Mat-Su Borough has \$5.9 million, mostly Federal Transit Administration money, to build roads and transit facilities in Hatcher Pass. But to use the money, it must first assess environmental impacts of the development.

Steve Noble, an engineer with Dowl HKM, the Anchorage firm the borough hired to study the environmental impacts, proposed focusing on using the \$3 million remaining to build a road to reach the south side of Hatcher Pass. The borough hopes to build an Olympic-class nordic ski area by fall 2011 there, with 20 miles of competitive trails and access to more recreational trails nearby.

Focusing on building access to the cross-country ski trails and tapping volunteers to build the trails is an affordable way to get more people skiing in Hatcher Pass, said John Duffy, borough manager.

The borough has been pressing to build a ski area in Hatcher Pass for more than 20 years but lack of money has frequently stalled the project. Several attempts to partner with private developers to build a project have gone off track, most recently a 2006 proposal by Anchorage developer JL Properties to build a \$42 million ski area that included a ski village and residential lots on the south side of Hatcher Pass.

Since, the borough hired Ron Swanson, a retired borough department head who had spent years pushing the project, to find a way to make the ski area happen without a developer.

In the plan Noble outlined, the borough could build the nordic ski area in 2011. The plan entails a one-mile road from Edgerton Parks Road north to the borough-leased Hatcher Pass land. Edgerton Parks veers off Palmer-Fishhook Road before it crosses the Little Susitna River. A parking area and bus stop would be at the road's end.

Noble said the road and bus stop with restrooms are essential because the borough would be spending federal transit money.

Mat-Su Ski Club co-founder Ed Strabel called the lack of funding for trails "a minuscule problem." Volunteers would be eager to help build the trails, he said.

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