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## HATCHER PASS RECREATIONAL AREA ACCESS, TRAILS AND TRANSIT FACILITIES

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#### AGENCY SCOPING MEETING

JUNE 2, 2009

#### NOTES

##### Presentation Overview

Kristen Hansen (DOWL HKM) began the agency meeting by outlining the scope of the project, explaining that DOWL HKM is working for the Matanuska-Susitna Borough (MSB) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) to improve access to the Hatcher Pass area. The transit and access improvements have been funded by a grant awarded by the FTA. To satisfy National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is being written to evaluate impacts as a result of the proposed project.

Kristen described the study areas, outlined the purpose and need for the project and explained the components of the FTA-funded and MSB-funded portions of the project. Kristen then gave a brief overview of the environmental field work and findings of the field work to date. Kristen also summarized public and agency comments received during the scoping period. She noted that the Scoping Summary Report and field work reports are posted to the website. Kristen said DOWL HKM is looking for feedback on any or all of these reports. She will also arrange a site visit for the agencies in late June or in July.

Kristen noted that DOWL HKM received only two formal letters from agencies in response to the scoping process for this project: one from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the other from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The EPA has special regulatory authority to review all EIS' and will be a significant presence throughout the process. She stated that the draft EIS will be sent to the MSB and FTA in the fall and will be available for agency and public review in early 2010.

Steve Noble (DOWL HKM) discussed the roadway alignment alternatives and explained the initial alignments into the Southern (Nordic) area, saying they were focused on general access points. He noted that the focus has centered in on three variations of access options that are approximately one mile west of the intersection of Palmer-Fishhook Road and Edgerton Parks Road. The final alignment selection and evaluation will be presented in the Preliminary Engineering Report (PER), which is still a draft undergoing internal review, but should be posted to the website in 4-8 weeks.

In evaluating access road and parking options into the Northern (Alpine) area, DOWL HKM noted that the existing road does not adhere to design criteria and is too steep for some buses. The proposed alternative is longer but less steep and the new parking lot will add transit and

additional parking spaces. DOWL HKM is also cognizant of the location of the public use area boundary.

Kristen then explained the current project schedule which has construction starting in summer 2011 and the facilities opening in fall 2012.

Linda Gehrke (FTA) said all of the letters to agencies inviting them to act as participating or "cooperating" agencies on the EIS would be going out on June 2, 2009 with a request for response within 30 days.

Kristen discussed the Coordination Plan that is required under the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act (aka SAFETEA-LU). The Plan discusses the roles of cooperating agencies, how the project will progress through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process along with NEPA milestones. Kristen said it would be posted to the project website shortly.

Jennifer Curtis (EPA) said the EPA has interpreted the SAFETEA-LU requirements as necessitating the EPA be a cooperating agency on most EIS's, however, they will provide formal response to FTS's invitation letter.

Linda concluded that from FTA's perspective this is a transit project and that the purpose and need of the project will be guided by transportation. She said there is a larger discussion of future phases, but that the EIS will focus on getting the buses to the locations to pick up and drop off passengers. She said it will also look at improvements needed to existing roads and proposed new roads, parking lots and transit facilities.

A summary of agency questions and comments on the project follows. DOWL HKM's responses are in italics.

**Matt LaCroix (EPA): How was the proposed location for the transit facility parking lot decided?**

*Steve explained that DOWL HKM took into consideration the conceptual trails layout that had been done in earlier phases of project planning, which placed the parking lot relatively high up the slope on a bench at approximately 1190 feet in elevation. However, based on survey data and the steep grades, DOWL HKM is proposing a parking area that would be lower in elevation, close to the first bench of the Nordic trail. This location would allow for better bus access due to less steep grades.*

**Matt: Are other alternative locations for the parking area being considered?**

*Steve confirmed that another location was considered but that the current location provides better grades for transit access, and would cost substantially less to construct, due to the shorter length.*

**Matt: Why not consider direct access from Hatcher Pass/Palmer-Fishhook Road?**

*Steve stated that a new bridge would be needed to cross the Little Susitna River and that the terrain would make it difficult to provide access higher up the steep mountain slopes at this location. In addition, the soils in that area have proven to be unsuitable (this is near the slide that occurred several years ago).*

**Matt: What about upgrades to Edgerton Parks Road? Would the current condition of the road handle all of the proposed traffic?**

*Steve said not a lot of time has been spent looking at Edgerton Parks Road, but that the road is in fairly good condition and could probably handle the amount of traffic expected to access the area. We would only anticipate a 10 percent or less increase in existing traffic volumes.*

**Linda Gehrke (FTA): Can you describe current conditions of the road?**

*It is a two-lane road approximately 28 feet wide with shoulders.*

**Jennifer Curtis (EPA): As far as the transit aspect of the project, have there been studies to determine how many people may use the transit service or would it be more individual vehicle use?**

*There are projected use numbers for both the Alpine and Nordic areas in the "Hatcher Pass: A New Beginning" document which is on the project website. Based on preliminary discussion with MASCOT, DOWL HKM envisions scheduled transit trips, but we do need to continue discussions with MASCOT to obtain additional information from them.*

**Jennifer: Do we know potential numbers?**

*Ron Swanson (RSW) said Alpine parking is limited because of the terrain and there would have to be transit from the south side on high use and peak user days. On the Nordic side, Ron said it would mostly be personal vehicle use on a day-to-day basis. However, Ron said those Nordic trails would be the only competitive trails in the MSB and that there will be a lot of buses when there are competitive high school and other similar events. He also said MASCOT wants to run service in this area.*

**Linda: The FTA requests that this information be included in the EIS because in order to receive our funding you need to have a fixed route that goes to both of these locations, so there will be scheduled service.**

**Jennifer: When you are referring to the Alpine area, is that the second bench?**

*Steve stated that Alpine access is actually located off Palmer-Fishhook Road. Ron also said it is expected that at peak times, there will be approximately 1,800 vehicles per day using the Alpine facility and approximately 100 users a day at the Nordic facility.*

**Jennifer: Will this information will be available in the PER?**

*This information will be in the PER which will be reviewed by the FTA and posted to the project website within the next few months.*

**Marla Carter (ADF&G): Where is there parking for people who need to get on the buses? Does MASCOT have a park and ride?**

*Ron said there will be parking for people wanting to ride the buses on the south side. Linda said the fixed bus route requires stops, so there would be bus stops along the way for those who do not want to drive and park in the south side area.*

**Matt: For someone coming from Anchorage who wants to ride MASCOT, is there a place people could park and ride?**

*Steve noted that a new park and ride area in Anchorage is not planned as part of this project.*

**Jennifer: Is there capacity on the buses?**

*Steve indicated that there is, based on discussions with MASCOT.*

**Matt: This facility will attract non-local users, you need to think about parking for this.**

*Steve said that people will be picked up from existing stops and MASCOT has the capacity for these additional riders.*

**Jennifer: Of the current Hatcher Pass users, do you know how many are from the MSB and how many are from outside the MSB?**

*Ron answered that there was a household survey approximately 15 years ago that showed 75 to 90 percent of users were from the MSB. The survey extended all the way to south Anchorage. South Anchorage use was low, but was higher for residents from the Muldoon Road area east to Eagle River-Chugiak, which also includes the two military bases.*

*The main point of the survey was to see how many people came to Hatcher Pass for skiing. The survey showed that those numbers were quite high and that is one of the reasons the MSB is pursuing this project. While there is no way to know an exact number or the location of people who will use Hatcher Pass for Nordic and Alpine skiing, it can be assumed that most of them are from Palmer and/or Wasilla.*

**Matt: The survey was looking at existing use of the Alpine area and the Nordic area would be a new use area, are you looking at a scaled down portion of the Alpine use to predict Nordic use?**

*Ron said it is hard to get definitive numbers on Nordic use but that there are good numbers on how many people currently use the various available Alpine facilities in the Anchorage bowl and at Girdwood. Steve said less than 1,000 vehicles per day currently use Edgerton Parks Road and that 80 to 100 vehicles would be added during peak Nordic use.*

**Matt: The people living near the Nordic area might not consider that figure a small number.**

*Steve stated that is why the road is being designed to minimize impacts to current residents, not using existing subdivisions, etc.*

*Steve said DOWL HKM plans to survey and flag all of the "yellow" alignments within the next few weeks, and noted that geotechnical surveys are planned for this fall.*

**Matt: Are you not anticipating that the geotechnical conditions would be a factor in the alignments?**

*Steve said that there are some areas of concern, based on previous geotechnical surveys that have been done in the area and cost estimates will have to account for those areas.*

**Matt: What is the total length of the "yellow" option?**

*The alignment lengths vary between 1 and 1.3 miles. The Alpine access is another one-half-mile.*

**Jennifer: How are you treating the independent utility of the project, since the purpose of the project is to support proposed MSB facilities and trails?**

*Linda said from the FTA perspective, it is viewed as an improvement to the existing access and transportation facilities, as there is a lot of current use in both the Nordic and Alpine areas.*

**Jennifer: As the purpose and need statement is currently worded it talks about proposed recreational development and it seems to contradict your earlier statement. The EPA is not opposed to analyzing the project as a transportation project but if you say you are**

**supporting proposed development, it seems that it would be hard to separate out the transit portion from the trails and other proposed recreational facilities.**

*Linda noted that since this is a transit project, the purpose and need will be focused on getting buses to locations to pick up and drop people off. The area is already used by day-trippers in both the Northern (Alpine) and Southern (Nordic) areas and we see the project as improving existing access and making it safer. We will modify the draft purpose and need to clarify this.*

**Matt: The Conceptual Design shows a bike path along the road. Will all of the roads have this bike path?**

*Steve stated that space will be provided for pedestrian pathways, however the construction of the pathways will depend on funding.*

**Matt: Aren't there existing ATV trails that cross through this area? I think there will be a lot of summer time use. How is this incorporated into the design?**

*Ron answered that the trails could be used by all kinds of users (skiers, hikers, bikers, horseback riders etc.) year-round. The Department of Natural Resources is looking at motorized and non-motorized use in the Hatcher Pass Management Plan area and whether there should be motorized corridors provided in some of these areas. In regards to this issue, the project will proceed based on the results of their report.*

**Ideally the area that provides access to the west does remain motorized, if someone was driving an ATV trailer, you would need to make accesses for those uses.**

*Ron stated that if the motorized corridors do become reality, then the parking areas could also become trailheads for those uses.*

**Dan Keyes (MSB): Once the Alpine segment is constructed, will there be the development of a non-profit group to manage the facility? Will they also be managing the Nordic area?**

*Ron noted that this idea is still being discussed within the MSB.*

**Jennifer: Looking at the bigger picture, I think there would be opportunities to promote more public transit into the area as opposed to individual use.**

*Ron said that is the intent of the project.*

**Jennifer: Do you have alternatives for the Alpine access?**

*Steve explained that there is really only one viable alternative for access into the Alpine area, since they are expanding an existing parking area.*

**Matt: What is the purpose of the existing road?**

*Steve noted that it was originally a pioneer road to a staging area during the last construction project along Hatcher Pass Road.*

**Matt: What is the size of the existing parking lot?**

*Steve stated that it is about two and one-half acres.*

**Matt: How does this compare to what you are proposing?**

*Steve said that it is about half the size of the proposed parking area. Ron noted that the goal is to keep the parking area out of sight from motorists traveling along Hatcher Pass Road.*

**After the comment and answer period Kristen thanked the agencies for their participation and encouraged submittal of comments on all the draft fieldwork reports, the coordination plan, and the alignment analysis presented at the meeting. Kristen ended by stating she would look into a site visit in the next few weeks to review wetland areas and the proposed alignments and would be contacting the agencies to participate.**