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

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### **PUBLIC SCOPING MEETING NO. 1**

#### **MEETING NOTES**

**SUBJECT:** Hatcher Pass Recreational Area Access, Trails and Transit Facilities

**DATE:** December 11, 2008

**TIME:** 5:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

**LOCATION:** Colony Middle School

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#### **PRESENTATION OVERVIEW**

Stewart Osgood (DOWL HKM) opened the public meeting with a presentation to the public on the Hatcher Pass Recreational Area Access, Trails and Transit Facilities project including the project schedule, efforts and funding. He began with an overview of the project and previous comments collected during work on development concepts.

Stewart explained how the Hatcher Pass Recreational Area Access, Trails and Transit Facilities project will support development of ski and recreation facilities at Hatcher Pass and that the Matanuska-Susitna Borough (MSB) is receiving federal funding from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) for development of various infrastructure improvements. The MSB will evaluate funding sources for the other components of the project, such as ski lifts and any facilities, such as chalets. The MSB and FTA are currently preparing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to evaluate the potential impacts of the proposed project. Development at Hatcher Pass will be phased over time beginning with access roads and trails.

Stewart then outlined the overall schedule, purpose and need for the project and the concepts for roads, trails and future development in the southern and northern areas. Kristen Hansen (DOWL HKM) explained the work being conducted for the EIS including the schedule, work that has been completed and the next steps in the process.

To conclude, Stewart explained the steps taken in the public involvement process and ways the public could get involved and keep up to date, including using the project website and being added to the mailing list. He then opened up the meeting to questions.

#### **Public Meeting, First Presentation**

Below is a summary of questions and comments that were raised during the first presentation. Staff responses are in italics.

**Have you come up with a better way to access the lower Nordic ski area?**

*Yes, there are three conceptual alternatives being analyzed.*

**Are these concepts written in stone?**

*No they are not.*

**Are there any bald eagle nests in the area?**

*Kristen responded that they did not see any nests in the area during our aerial survey. They did count Bald Eagles in the area though.*

**Will this be the only EIS study conducted? Does it cover all aspects of development or just road access?**

*Kristen stated that the EIS is conducted to address all the primary, secondary and cumulative impacts. This study will encompass all the proposed phases of the project.*

**Are you saying that determination of residential or non-residential suitability will be determined by the EIS?**

*Kristen stated that DOWL HKM is required to look at the secondary cumulative impacts of residential development but they won't be studied in as much detail as the proposed action.*

**Looking at the property the Borough owns, are they trying to determine soil suitability for residential development?**

*Residential development is not part of the proposed action being evaluated in the EIS, however, it is being looked at as part of the secondary cumulative impacts. Ron Swanson (MSB) stated that this study and all the environmental work will give the MSB enough information to be able to evaluate the feasibility of residential development.*

**Why are they doing all this for residential housing and how much more money is the Borough going to be spending with DOWL HKM to do these environmental assessments for residential and commercial development? How much money are you spending on the research for residential development?**

*This study will not necessarily lead to residential development. The study has to be prepared no matter the outcome. We are spending roughly \$1.5 million on the EIS.*

**Is the money for the study from the Borough?**

*No, it is federal money.*

**Does the EIS cover all three proposed phases?**

*We will write the environmental document for the full build-out of all three phases. From a funding standpoint it is likely that the project would be conducted in separate phases, but the EIS will cover all three. We are writing the EIS for the FTA and there is a lot of coordination we have to do with the FTA to determine what level of detailed analysis they want.*

**If the FTA determined that they only want an EIS for the first phase, should we expect you to come back and do further EIS's for the next phases?**

*Only if federal funding were involved on those future phases.*

**Do you contact property owners if the proposed access road goes through their property? Do you tell them if you are going to buy/take it from them? I did not receive anything about this meeting or the fact my property is impacted by one of the proposed roads.**

*You can sign up for notifications at this meeting or through the project website. Currently, there are not any proposed access roads, just conceptual arrows showing various points of access into the southern area. The lines are conceptual. The roads could never be built as depicted, and a lot of work has to be done before the road alignment is determined including looking at suitable areas to build the road, and ways to minimize impacts to private property owners and the environment, etc.*

**If private property is needed for the road, what happens?**

*We do everything we can to avoid using private property, but there is a process, eminent domain, for acquiring land if it is absolutely needed. However, the project is a long way from this point.*

*Ron Swanson (MSB) stated that they try to avoid using private property, but if they have to, they will only use property in a willing partnership with a private seller, they will not use condemnation.*

**You told us the roads are conceptual, but I have also been told that you eliminated the road coming from Fishhook as it is too expensive. If these are only conceptual ideas, that road should be added back in for further study. You are talking about bringing all this extra traffic through a one-way in and out residential area and all the people living there are not going to want all that traffic. Can you add that alternative back in?**

*This concept can be revisited during the scoping process and an access point from the Hatcher Pass Road can be analyzed.*

**You stated you have \$1.6 million dollars for the EIS out of a total \$6 million dollars. Will the EIS cost \$1.6 million to complete? Will the rest of the \$6 million dollars take us into construction? Is there a possibility that this will just be studied and then stopped? Will we have to go back for more money?**

*There are no absolutes, however, there is funding in place to complete the EIS and it is estimated that there will be enough money left to complete Phase 1 of the project without additional funding being needed. This will include the road and trails. We will need more money to construct the other phases including Alpine facilities. The \$6 million dollars is federally funded to complete the study and create access to the area.*

**Where did the estimates for the number of Nordic Skiing user days come from in the federal registry? They seem low. Please consider listing the estimated user days for both Nordic and Alpine skiing in the same way so we can compare them adequately.**

*Ron Swanson (MSB) responded that the user days were estimated by the MSB and can be revisited to ensure that they adequately reflect a realistic number of user days. It is very hard to*

*estimate figures with Nordic Skiers as they have such freedom of use on the trails; with input from local users we can adjust these figures. We can also adjust the way the estimate of user's days for both Nordic and Alpine Skiers is listed so they can be compared side-by-side.*

**The plans and studies for Hatcher Pass have turned into a joke. They might use the environmental and feasibility studies as reason not to support this as so many have been done. We have to be careful that when we do these studies that we don't just focus on the piece of paper we will get in 2011, but also see what we can do to get things implemented so we can be skiing by next November. We need to do whatever is necessary to get some money to get a small T- bar or something. If we focus on this we can have people skiing by next year. Keep working on this as it is needed and required by law, but request our government do whatever is necessary to get us skiing next year.**

**For 6 million dollars we could be skiing by next year – if you give us an access road, I could come up with volunteers to help us groom the trails. Trails are easy and cheap to get volunteers to help build. Buildings can come later.**

**A few years ago we had a grant to clear about 4 km of trails. The public wants Nordic development. Alpine skiers are less organized. We need this right now – we would like to get this moving. The high school teams can't even hold a meet, we can go anywhere in Alaska but the Mat-Su Valley to ski.**

**Is there any way to separate the Alpine from the Nordic and not have to wait on both?**

*The Alpine and Nordic features have to be assessed in the EIS as it has to cover the entire proposed project, one can't be separated from the other because of the cumulative impacts. Ron Swanson (MSB) stated that he explained the reasons as to why it is not a good idea to separate developing the two kinds of activities in the "Hatcher Pass -- A New Beginning" draft report.*

**I was told the final decision on this plan will be put to a vote by the people. That's what Lynne Woods said, and Robert Wells told me last night. I want that on the record.**

*A MSB assembly member, (Robert Wells) stated that if the project uses Borough tax dollars the plan will be put to a vote.*

**I advocate strongly that you get with Fish and Game as this area has not been assessed for moose since the 80's and right now the moose are taking over.**

*We have coordinated with Fish and Game, and will continue to do so in the future.*

## **PUBLIC MEETING, SECOND PRESENTATION**

A second presentation was given later in evening. Below is a summary of the questions and the comments from the second presentation.

**Can FTA funding actually pay for any type of trails, including the Nordic trails?**

*FTA funding can pay for certain trails because the trails are part of a transportation function, for example, the trails to and from the Nordic and Alpine ski areas, but not the Nordic or Alpine trails themselves.*

**What is the difference between an EIS and an Environmental Assessment (EA)? I find trying to distinguish between the two very confusing.**

*Kristen stated that the EIS is the highest level of environmental documentation a project can obtain, while the EA is the actual work being done to obtain the EIS.*

**I think you should find the shortest amount of space to minimize construction in the Hatcher Pass area. You would be able to minimize the road construction while minimizing space and making a more direct route.**

**The amount of access should be considered on the roadways. If this project is actually built, with only a two lane road, there will be a lot of traffic, with a lot of safety issues.**

**Why were there macroinvertebrate tests (surveys) done in only two streams?**

*Kristen stated that DOWL HKM in coordination with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game performed these surveys to obtain additional data that could be extrapolated to get a general idea for the food for fish and stream quality in the area.*

**If there is an allotted \$3 million dedicated to developing the Nordic Center at Hatcher Pass, what is prohibiting us from building the facility?**

*Ron Swanson (MSB) stated that the primary reason there is not a facility at Hatcher Pass now is because the environmental requirements must be completed.*

**Is the Nordic Center tied with Alpine?**

*Ron stated that as of now, the Nordic Center is tied with the Alpine.*

**I have a concern with the fact that Alpine skiing has many costs to keep the sport going, while Nordic skiing is not nearly as expensive. Alpine skiing will only decrease the profits that Hatcher Pass can make if it was a Nordic-only center.**

**What happens if the Assembly decides to only go with the Nordic facility?**

*Ron stated that this would violate the management plan.*

**If you are saying that residential areas could eventually be in the Hatcher Pass area, you should disclose that on the presentations, fact sheets, etc. so you are not misleading people who do not want the residential housing in the area.**

**Are the FTA funds already earmarked, or do you have to use a certain amount each year before you lose the money? Is there a chance we could lose it?**

*Ron stated that the money is available and is not going anywhere.*

**What is the anticipated budget after the EIS is complete?**

*The estimated budget will be \$4.5 million.*

**There is a large focus on the Nordic trails. Are standards for Nordic trails going to be maintained?**

*We currently have not looked at this, but will be looking at the layout of the site. We will be sure to avoid certain areas in which it is not appropriate to place trails.*

**Hatcher Pass should be addressed more as a year-round facility, not just a ski resort.**

**There was a suggestion of the Alpine ski area in the summer having a mountain bike trail. The suggestion was to have bike racks on the lifts and a trail down the mountain for any type of rider.**

**Motorized traffic (snow machines, ATVs, etc.) should be kept in a separate area of Hatcher Pass. You could put a motorized trail in to travel west of the area.**