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

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#### **About the Project and the Area**

##### **What is the purpose of this project?**

Hatcher Pass's potential for development into a high-quality Alpine and Nordic ski and recreation area for local residents and visitors has been recognized for decades. The Matanuska-Susitna Borough is now embarking on a project to see this potential become reality through the development of a regional day-use recreational area. In 2008, the Borough Assembly endorsed a conceptual plan that sets the direction on how to proceed for Alpine skiing facilities in the northern portion of the project area, and Nordic skiing facilities in the southern portion of the project area.

### **Where is this project?**

Hatcher Pass is located approximately 12 miles north-east of Palmer, about 14 miles east of Wasilla, and 55 miles north of Anchorage, Alaska, in the heart of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. The topography is best described as a glacially carved alpine valley. The altitude of the proposed alpine facility is 1,479 feet. The total vertical distance for the Alpine ski runs will be approximately 2,400 feet.

### **How big is the project area?**

The project area consists of 10,000 acres, all of which is located within the Government Peak Sub-Unit of the Hatcher Pass Management Plan area. The Government Peak area consists of prime skiing and other recreational use terrain, which is easily accessible by more than half the state's residents.

### **Who owns the land in the project area?**

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough (MSB) owns over 3,000 acres where the main developments and improvements will be located. Another 7,000 acres of state land has been transferred to Borough management to support development of the recreation area.

The MSB has embarked on a campaign to limit and define development risks. The Borough acquired the Hatcher Pass lands necessary to develop the ski and recreation areas. Ownership and control of the property where the development and facilities will be located, by a single entity who strongly advocates for the development of both the Alpine and Nordic ski area, will significantly simplify and expedite development of the project.

## **Environmental Impact Statement**

### **What are the steps that must be taken before we see the recreational facilities?**

There are many steps to take before construction of the facilities begins. An Environmental Impact Statement must be completed, funding needs to be acquired, the Borough Assembly must decide on what facilities will be built, a management structure and organization must be agreed to and formed, and final design and permits must be obtained

### **What is the purpose of the Environmental Impact Statement?**

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough has received federal funds to improve access to the area by developing roads, parking areas, trails and transit facilities.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires federal agencies providing project funding to evaluate the possible environmental impacts due to their decisions and the improvements. Since the Federal Transit Authority is providing funds for transportation improvements; they must comply with NEPA by completing an environmental review of this project.

### **Does the Environmental Impact Statement cover all the proposed phases?**

No - the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) has funding available for construction of road improvements, parking, trail access, and transit facilities for phase 1 of this project. As part of the National Environmental Policy Act, the FTA must conduct an environmental study to look at the impacts of any improvements that will be funded by the FTA.

In addition, as part of the federally-funded environmental study, there is a section called the cumulative impact analysis. This study will determine the possible impacts of "reasonably foreseeable" projects in the area for Phase 1: for the Alpine area this is one lift, one lodge, downhill trails, and parking; for the Nordic area this is trails and access. Phases II-IV will not be covered in the environmental study as the FTA does not consider these later phases to be "reasonably foreseeable".

### **Project Phasing and Facilities**

#### **What facilities will be provided?**

As currently envisioned, the proposed Hatcher Pass Ski and Recreation Area will be built in phases to provide an opportunity for development of a ski and recreation area that is both financially feasible and environmentally sensitive. Only the first phase is being considered at this time.

By developing the recreational facilities in phases the following objectives will be met:

- Provide facilities that will meet public needs that can be expanded to meet anticipated demand over a period of time.
- The ability to grow with market demand and add more user-requested trails, lifts, and support services as needed and confirmed by operational experience.
- Provide a facility that is designed primarily to serve the local and regional markets.
- General terrain balance that satisfies the skier market including all ages, abilities, and special population groups.
- Balanced lift and trail capabilities.
- Provide base staging and congregation areas that are in balance with mountain access requirements and social and competitive event needs.
- Provide adequate skier and guest services.
- Ensure efficient mountain, terrain, trail, and base area circulation.

#### **What facilities are included in Phase I?**

Phase I in both the northern (Alpine) and southern areas (Nordic) will include the backbone for Phase I and potential future phases. This includes roads, parking areas, transit facilities for MASCOT service, and access trails to the ski areas.

In the northern Alpine area, two lifts, a day lodge, snowmaking and lighting will be included, also supporting infrastructure such as electrical and telephone service, and domestic water, sewer facilities, and a maintenance facility.

In the southern Nordic area 10 km of family trails, 10 km of competitive trails along with warming areas, and restrooms will be included.

### **What is the cost of Phase I?**

Current estimates to complete all the environmental analysis work, design, and construction has been estimated to cost \$24.8 million.

### **When will the additional phases be built?**

It is not known when additional phases will be built. That will depend on a variety of factors including: public acceptance, cost, the amount of users, revenue generated, and the ability of the area to cover operational costs and pay off debt service.

### **Why can't you just develop the Nordic area?**

The Borough has received federal funds to develop transportation infrastructure for both areas (Nordic and Alpine). Therefore, the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will focus on the transportation improvements for these areas. The EIS will also have to address the cumulative effects of the actual recreation uses. Once the EIS is complete, the Borough can decide whether to move forward with the improvements in both areas or just one area.

### **What might be included in the additional phases?**

In the northern area, an additional lift, a mid-mountain chalet, and additional ski runs would be added in Phase II. In Phase III, the main lift will be converted to a high-speed quad, more trails would be added with night lighting and snowmaking, and the day lodge would be expanded.

In the southern area, a day lodge and 10 kms of additional Nordic and multi-purpose trails will be added along with a sledding hill. In Phase III, night lighting would be added for some of the trails and a biathlon range built.

### **Who will own and operate the area and facilities?**

Past proposals to develop the area have included private ownership and management, and public-private partnership. For a variety of reasons, none of those proposals came to fruition. In order to build a facility that meets the recreational needs identified by the public, the Borough is exploring development and management by a semi-public entity – The Hatcher Pass Development Authority. The Board of Directors would be appointed by the Assembly, but unlike other Borough boards and commissions, the Hatcher Pass Development Authority would be autonomous from daily oversight from the Borough administration and Assembly. The Authority would be responsible for the daily operations (including hiring their own staff), budget

and funding for the Recreation Area, yet would be held responsible by the Assembly and the public. Other ski areas have successfully operated using this model. The State of Alaska uses similar and successful organizational structures such as the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation, the Alaska Railroad Corporation, and the Alaska Export and Industrial Development Authority.

### **Project and Area Development**

#### **Is residential development part of this project?**

No. Residential development is not proposed in any of the phases. However, because the potential for residential development does exist, the Borough, as part of the environmental field investigation work, is having the area analyzed to determine if the area could support residential and commercial development and at what scale. This analysis will include a determination if the area will support additional domestic water and sewer systems, whether the soils could support residential or commercial development and other related factors.

#### **Will this project cause more development in the area?**

It is common for projects like this to cause more development on lands adjacent or in close proximity to the project. Recreational facilities attract people who want to make the most out of their available leisure time. The Borough does not have any plans to develop anything more than the recreational facilities. However, the area to the south of the project area is all private land. Landowners may see an opportunity in developing services that support the ski area.

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

If private property is needed, the Borough will pursue property acquisition from a willing seller. The Borough does not plan, nor do they have any intention, to use condemnation to acquire property for this project.

#### **Will this project impact the Hatcher Pass Public Use Area?**

The Hatcher Pass Public Use Area was created in 1986 by the Alaska State Legislature. The area is open to a variety of recreational activities. This project is not expected to adversely impact the Public Use Area. The proposed Phase 1 development in the southern area is outside the Public Use Area boundaries. In the northern area an existing road and some alpine ski runs (which is an authorized use) may cross a corner of the Public Use Area.

#### **Where are you planning to put the southern access road?**

Several road alignments are being evaluated to access the site from Edgerton Parks Road. It has already been determined that the cost of building another bridge over the Little Susitna River and across the Hatcher Pass Public Use Area is too expensive and controversial. Road alternatives will be identified in the spring of 2009 for public review and comments.

## **Funding**

### **Where is the funding coming from?**

The Borough is receiving federal funding from the Federal Transit Administration to prepare the Environmental Impact Statement and for development of the road improvements, parking areas, transit facilities for MASCOT service, and access trails to the ski areas. Funding sources have not yet been identified for the remainder of Phase I. The Borough is seeking additional funding sources for the other components of the project, such as developing the trail network, ski lifts and chalets.

### **Will the project use taxpayer money?**

That has not been determined. Until the Environmental Impact Statement has been completed and a Record of Decision issued, it is not possible to finally determine what can and cannot be constructed and the ultimate cost of those improvements. The Borough Assembly will make the ultimate decision on what will be constructed, how it should be funded and how it will be operated. Public hearings will be held on the "ultimate look" of the facilities, the management structure and funding sources. If the Borough Assembly decides that taxpayer dollars should be used for any portion of this project in the future, the taxpayers will be given an opportunity to vote and decide on whether taxpayer dollars should be used.

### **How long will construction take once the decision is made to proceed and funding is in place?**

Construction of Phase I is proposed to begin in spring 2011 and should be complete by late fall 2012.

### **Is this project guaranteed to happen?**

Not yet. That decision cannot be made until the Environmental Impact Statement is completed, funding sources identified and secured, and the management structure determined. The final determination on the fate of the project will be made by the Borough Assembly, following public input and hearings.

### **I have seen plans like this many times over the last few years - why is this plan different?**

Past plans have varied from a large four-season resort to one similar to this, but with a large residential and commercial development component. This plan is designed to be a regional day-use recreation area without a residential or commercial component.

## **Area Uses and Regulations**

### **Are there any plans to change the motorized recreational vehicle usage regulations in that area?**

Currently, the entire project area is closed to motorized uses. Any changes to motorized recreational vehicle usage would require the approval of the Borough Assembly and State

Department of Natural Resources. At the present time there are no plans to change the “status quo.”

### **How about firearm regulations?**

Presently the area is open to the discharge of firearms and for lawful hunting. Changes to firearm regulations for the area are not proposed as part of this project. Only the Board of Game can change the regulations concerning lawful hunting.

### **Will I be able to use the trails in the summer?**

Hiking, running, mountain biking, horseback riding and other non-motorized uses will be allowed and encouraged on the trails in the summer months.

## **Public Participation/More Information**

### **How can I stay informed?**

Visit the [hatcherpass.com](http://hatcherpass.com) website regularly to review studies, fact sheets, presentations and other materials as the project progresses. You can also sign up for e-mail updates about the project. Public meetings will also be advertised in the local paper and listed on the project website.

### **How do I share my opinion with the project team regarding the project?**

The official scoping period for this project ended on January 16, 2009, however, the project team will continue to accept and consider comments throughout the duration of the project. In addition, there will be additional comment periods on alternatives in the spring of 2009 and on the complete environmental document and its recommendations in the fall 2010. Comments can be submitted through the project website at [www.hatcherpass.com](http://www.hatcherpass.com), via e-mail at [hatcherpass@dowl.com](mailto:hatcherpass@dowl.com) or by calling Michela Spitz at DOWL HKM 907-746-7600.

### **What types of comments are most useful?**

We want to hear about issues that are important to you. Your comments will be used to help shape the development and outcome of the project. Each comment received is reviewed by project team members and becomes part of the project's official public record. Your comment is not a ballot and is not used as a means to measure the degree of support for the project. The most useful types of comments may include the following:

- Alternative approaches and ideas for accomplishing project goals.
- Information and issues that need to be considered.
- Information on how you use the area and how a project might affect that use.
- Identify incomplete or inaccurate information.
- Opinions and discussion regarding a particular element or alternative.