



Newly appointed DOT Czar seeks to make Seward Highway safer

By Julie St. Louis
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The recent appointment of Steven Horn to the Alaska Department of Transportation post of special projects manager couldn't come soon enough for those commuting along the deadly stretch of the Seward Highway between Anchorage and Portage.

Horn, a 30-year manager with the state DOT was brought out of retirement on Jan. 28 to facilitate highway safety improvements within the four safety corridors in Southcentral by DOT Commissioner Patrick Kemp.

"Horn has broad experience in both traffic and road design and construction," said Larry Daniels, Girdwood 2020 member and co-chairman of the newly formed Seward/Kenai Peninsula Highway Transportation Corridor Safety Task Force. "The fact that Commissioner Kemp has taken this step so early in his position as Commissioner is an encouraging sign for those of us who feel there is so much need to focus on all aspects of improved safety between Anchorage and the Peninsula" added Daniels.

Daniels and his fellow co-chairman, Hank Hosford, were injured in an accident near mile 106 of the Seward Highway in November of 2010, and feel strongly, as do others in Glacier Valley, that changes need to be made to improve safety. "Let's not miss this opportunity to find the short and long term solutions that will fix that road," said Daniels.



Photo courtesy of Lynne' Doran

Stakeholders brought together by Girdwood 2020 to form a Seward Highway/Kenai Peninsula Safety Task Force.



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Tragedy struck again last week on the Seward Highway with the second fatal accident in January. There were three fatalities on the highway in December in two separate accidents. This time, a driver of a southbound vehicle attempted to pass another car on the slick highway near Indian at mile 105. That accident took the life of the passenger, a 44-year-old Seward man, and sent three others to area hospitals with non life-threatening injuries.

Again this accident hits close to home, with occupants in the northbound vehicle heading to Anchorage after a day in Girdwood with friends. Per Bjorn-Roli, 69, and Maria Bjorn-Roli, 61, have been long active in community civic organizations and events at the Alyeska Resort expressed thankfulness at surviving the accident with just broken ribs and arm.

The four safety corridors that Horn will oversee are the Seward, Sterling and Parks Highways, and Knik Goose Bay Road. Horn will coordinate various funding sources, as well as pull together several agencies and associations, such as trucking, EMS, and other safety committees to find near-term solutions that will save lives.

As one of the first actions in his new capacity, Horn dropped in on last Saturday's monthly Girdwood 2020 meeting to introduce himself to the board members. He listened to several comments and concerns, and promised to find answers to various questions posed during the brief introduction.

When asked about his goals during his tenure, Horn said, "Bottom line, my hope is for zero fatalities, and to focus on what we can do to bring the number of accidents down." According to Horn, part of that strategy will be looking at non-enforcement projects that provide more driver awareness, law enforcement options, and physical projects to the roadway, some of which are already in the works for the summer road construction season.

As for Girdwood residents' participation in bringing safer commutes along Turnagain Arm, Girdwood 2020 will continue to take a leadership role in continuing their highway safety task force founded in November 2011. They held an organizational roundtable on Jan. 16 at the community center to bring stakeholders to the table. "That was just the beginning," said Daniels. "Our goal is to spotlight issues on the highway and keep the momentum moving forward."

Daniels and Hosford will be meeting with Horn to get an update on work that is either planned or designed for the planning process for the whole corridor, enforcement and operational processes. "It's a big agenda," said Daniels.