

Alaska's scenic Seward Highway doesn't need another quarry ruining the view

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The Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities wants to realign a two-mile section of the Seward Highway near Windy Corner. After decades of planning, the agency recently conjured up the location of its preferred rock quarry like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. The quarry would be in Chugach State Park.

Anyone who's driven the length of Turnagain Arm on the Seward Highway knows how drop-dead gorgeous it is. Kansas would kill for a view like that.

The juxtaposition of mountains and the sea, in their natural states, is always scenic. The winding two-lane highway and the occasional roadside attraction detract little from the experience.

Outside of the highway and railroad rights of way, most of the land between Potter Marsh and Girdwood is in Chugach State Park. The park is one reason why the Seward Highway acquired a National Scenic Byway designation in 2000.

But a winding two-lane road can be dangerous. Add falling rocks, an icy surface, dark winters, and drivers willing or drunk enough to speed past long lines of cars into oncoming traffic, and the Seward Highway has earned a reputation as one of Alaska's deadliest highways.

DOTPF has been trying to improve the highway's safety for decades. Next up is the Windy Corner project, a multimillion-dollar affair that will straighten the highway between mileposts 105 and 107 by shifting it and the Alaska Railroad more than 400 feet into Turnagain Arm.

Those two miles accumulated [eight fatalities between 1977 and 2012](#), on average one fatality or major injury per year, according to state crash statistics.

DOTPF estimates that building out into the mudflats will require 1.8 million cubic yards of material, almost enough to fill Yankee Stadium four times. Highway planners would like to use the cheapest material possible. Because transporting rock is expensive, the cheapest rock is nearest to the project. In fact, it's in Chugach State Park, right next door to the small community of Rainbow.

Chugach State Park has already suffered the indignity of having entire hillsides blasted away to provide rocks for road projects. The latest and greatest quarry is near Bird Creek. One might defend its location by arguing the need for more parking for anglers. But it's still ugly as sin.

Another strip of mountainside, nearly a mile long, was hauled off about a mile west of Girdwood. A corner was removed near Beluga Point in a more recent project. And older, smaller quarries are scattered the length of Turnagain Arm.

Looking for a source of suitable material for the Windy Corner project, DOTPF has set its sights on [a wooded knoll just west of Rainbow](#). The prospective quarry appears to be several times the size of the Bird excavation pit. Suspecting it won't be a popular decision, DOTPF plans to partially conceal the massive borrow pit [behind a narrow strip of cliff and trees](#). However, in its eagerness to save money – not a bad

thing for a government agency – DOTPF has failed to adequately assess alternative material sites.

DOTPF has been planning to redesign Windy Corner since at least 1986.

http://www.windycorner.info/projects/windycorner/documents/2004_CE_Apx_B.pdf Back then the project envisioned minor changes. Potential sites for rock quarries were small and scattered. Many, if not most, would have blended with the natural cliffs.

[One of the laws that highway planners must conform to](#) is Section 4(f) of the federal Department of Transportation Act. Section 4(f) requires state transportation agencies using federal funds to evaluate project alternatives and avoid publicly owned parks unless there is no feasible and prudent alternative. DOTPF decided that the Windy Corner project's impact on the park was so negligible that Section 4(f) didn't apply. Unfortunately, their "final" analysis was based on the 1986 version of the highway plan.

Subsequent related letters on DOTPF's project website are dated as late as 2004. But that's still 12 years ago. The project has been modified substantially since then.

According to [Federal Highway Administration guidelines](#), an alternative may not be considered prudent if it results in additional costs of an "excessive" or "extraordinary magnitude"; however, "excessive cost alone will not necessarily prevent an alternative from being considered prudent."

[In 2013, DOTPF compared the cost](#) of obtaining fill from "the nearest material sources to the north and south of the project area." Those sites were in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough and near Portage. The agency demonstrated that the rocks in the park were much cheaper, \$20 million cheaper.

That's useful information, but the analysis DOTPF performed in 1986, the one that didn't include digging the big hole in the park, is clearly out of date. The newly proposed material site is orders of magnitude larger and uglier than anything contemplated in past plans, and it will undoubtedly affect public use of the park.

DOTPF estimated the cost of completely avoiding the park, by moving the highway and railroad into the middle of Turnagain Arm, to be \$500 million.

http://www.windycorner.info/projects/windycorner/documents/2004_CE_Apx_B.pdf Realignment within the park is a much less expensive alternative. But just because the road stays in the park doesn't mean there are no feasible and prudent alternatives for the rock quarry.

There are other considerations. [According to the project's website](#), the back wall of the quarry will be about 230 feet high and the quarry will be accessible from the highway.

This presents a public hazard. The quarry entrance, next to a pullout, will be only 80 feet wide. The rock walls will be crumbly. There seems to be no provision for terracing, which would make the quarry even larger but would catch some of the falling rocks. Falling rocks are liable to kill more curious park visitors than the project saves by preventing some motor vehicle collisions.

Waiting to unveil the plan for a massive rock quarry until the project design was 75 percent complete was poor planning. The applicability of Section 4(f) [should be assessed in the early stages of a project](#). By waiting until the eleventh hour, DOTPF appears to be pressuring the Division of Parks and Recreation and park users into accepting the quarry as a *fait accompli*.

Anyone who drives the Seward Highway wants it to be safe. But Alaskans who appreciate the park and the surrounding scenery also deserve to see an updated and fair assessment of alternative material sources. Chugach State Park shouldn't have to shoulder the entire burden of upgrading the Seward Highway.

If DOTPF gets the quarry they want, a precedent will be firmly established, carved in stone in fact, for obtaining road fill from the park. With lots more road work to come, it's not hard to imagine a time when traveling along this National Scenic Byway will feel like driving through a series of gravel pits.

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