

Alaska Dispatch News

Opinions

Balancing scenery and safety on Seward Highway takes mountains of money

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If it's summer, there must be slowdowns on the Seward Highway, serious accidents, pleas for patience and arguments about how to handle the traffic.

There's been a stop-and-start planning process over the years about protecting travelers from reckless drivers going far above or below the speed limit.

Some people will never pull the old RV over no matter how many cars are lined up like links in a chain. Nor is there any shortage of idiots trying to save a few seconds by passing in dangerous spots.

Add distracted driving, alcohol and the Sunday struggle to get back to town and you know what happens on one of the most beautiful and dangerous roads in Alaska.

It is an All-American Road, a National Scenic Byway, an Alaska Scenic Byway and a National Forest Byway, but it also an escape route for those trying to get from here to there.

The state has added passing lanes, straightened some curvy stretches and taken other traffic safety steps to reduce the Seward stress level, but the traffic is getting heavier — more than 20,000 cars a day on July weekends. That's up by about a third over the past two decades.

Four-lane divided highway?

Bill Chadwick, who has responded to more Seward Highway crash scenes than he cares to remember, is not alone in thinking that a four-lane divided highway is the solution between Anchorage and Girdwood.

"It's the only way to go," said Chadwick, retired chief of the Girdwood Fire Department and a paramedic for four decades.

A slower speed limit, even 45 mph, he said, would still mean a deadly head-on crash in the unlikely event reckless drivers would ever travel that slow.

He said in the short term, increased enforcement is essential — though that is not happening because of budget cuts. The continuation of road safety projects along the corridor helps, but rumble strips and electronic signs informing drivers they are speeding can only do so much.

This is hardly a new discussion. The same points and the same solutions have been offered for years.

"I think there are people that are fed up with having their relatives and their loved ones die," Chadwick told a reporter in 2009 after a series of accidents. "There's people in my department that are fed up with putting kids in body bags. And it's just time to do something about it."

There have been 19 fatal crashes since 2009 between Potter Marsh and a spot 3 miles beyond Girdwood, a statistical reminder that the risk of dying behind the wheel is far greater than a fatal bear attack in the nearby mountains.

"Most residents of Girdwood know at least one person who has been killed on the road," the Girdwood Valley Service Area Board of Supervisors wrote this spring to Gov. Bill Walker and Anchorage Mayor Ethan Berkowitz.

The Parnell administration had an ambitious plan to "meet the motorized and nonmotorized traffic needs for the next 50 years" along the corridor, but that led nowhere.

The segment from Girdwood to Anchorage was to be evaluated first because it has "unique engineering and environmental challenges" compared to the rest of the Seward Highway.

A primary objective was to "evaluate a four-lane divided highway to understand challenges, costs and impacts," with a report that was supposed to be done a year and a half ago.

The unique cramped quarters along the rocky cliffs and the shore create challenges measured in mountains of dollar bills. Balancing safety and scenery ends in conflicting opinions.

By mid-2015, the department concluded the corridor study, as envisioned, wasn't extensive enough to pin down all the engineering, environmental and land use answers.

Department spokeswoman Shannon McCarthy said the department scaled it back to a more limited reconnaissance study completed this year. The state spent about \$1.1 million.

A planning overview from early in the corridor study said there had been Seward Highway projects in the range of \$20 million to \$30 million per mile, "which could lead to a total corridor cost for this project of \$560 million to \$840 million. Interchanges at the Alyeska Highway, Bird, Indian and Potter Marsh will add to this cost."

\$260 million in improvements coming

The department has made \$45 million worth of improvements over the last decade, adding passing lanes and taking other steps, with an additional \$260 million worth of projects in the works.

About \$5 million has been spent on Windy Corner, a complicated project from Mile 105 to Mile 107 that is expected to cost \$60 million to \$80 million. There are significant permitting issues to resolve.

For the longer term, the next step is a "planning and environmental linkages study," McCarthy said, that entails more public involvement and engineering.

"This process has several advantages — it allows us to engage in a full public process and the ability to study and eliminate alternatives, before starting specific projects," she said.

The cost of a four-lane highway and railroad changes could be \$1 billion or a lot more, money that will be hard to find.

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Columnist Dermot Cole, who lives in Fairbanks, has been a reporter, editor and author. For 40 years, he has written extensively about Alaska politics and history.

