

Eklutna Valley Community Council
December 7, 2023
Meeting minutes

The meeting was chaired by council president Rick Sinnott and began at 6:35 p.m. We met at the Chugach State Park ranger station. Sixteen council members were present: Dan Thompson, Margan Grover, Russ Carpenter, Teal Heller, Lisa and Rick Sinnott, Mike Wiedmer, Patrick Burns, Kevin Menkens, David VanOrd, Tom and Helen Bohn, Buff and Deb Rix, Randy Bangerter, and Mary Keller. Kyle Robillard, with the Native Village of Eklutna, and Representative Dan Saddler also attended.

With one change, Rick's request to add some new information from our Assembly member Kevin Cross, the meeting agenda was approved unanimously. The minutes of the September 20, 2023, council meeting were approved unanimously with no changes.

Dan Thompson reported that the council still has \$578.38 in its account.

OLD BUSINESS

Updating the Chugiak-Eagle River Comprehensive Plan. The municipal budget now has \$200,000 to update the Chugiak-Eagle River Comprehensive Plan, which was last updated in 2004, but that update was essentially the same as the 1994 version. Our communities have changed a lot since then. Rick said, as he understands it, some of the funding will be used for studies, e.g., for comparing our characteristics and needs with other comparable communities, and some will be used to hire a planner as staff for the Chugiak-Eagle River Advisory Board (CERAB). CERAB, with representatives from all community councils north of JBER, will provide policy guidance for the final document.

Winter road maintenance. We had a record snowfall in November. It took about a week for DOT to plow Eklutna Lake Road, but we are not in this alone. Two days after Eklutna Lake Road was finally plowed the municipality reportedly had plowed only 40 of 61 snow removal sectors.

Eklutna Lake Road is priority level 4, one of the last state-owned roads in the municipality to be plowed and sanded after a snow or ice storm. A major complication is that four government entities plow in Eklutna Valley: state parks plows the last mile of Eklutna Lake Road and its parking lots, AWWU plows their access roads into the canyon and to the pump station near the lake, McKenna Brothers plows the two subdivisions and the first two miles of Eklutna Lake Road under contract with the Chugiak/Birchwood/Eagle River Rural Road Service Area (CBERRRSA), and DOT plows between Mile 2 and 9. Typically, the other roads are plowed before DOT plows most of Eklutna Lake Road.

Rick said he has been investigating a variety of solutions, but having a hard time getting answers. He asked Chugach State Park about closing the park if a major snowfall makes Eklutna Lake Road dangerous. They said no. Even if they did, people would still come. He asked DOT four questions about who is responsible for maintaining Eklutna Lake Road. They've answered part of one and are supposed to get back to him with other answers. He asked the CBERRRSA board of supervisors if we are a member – after three weeks they still aren't sure. But of course we are: the municipal website shows that Eklutna Valley is in the CBERRRSA boundary, our two subdivisions are plowed rather quickly after a snowfall, and we pay property taxes to support the RRSA. When the CBERRRSA board of supervisors finally

decide Eklutna Valley is in their RRSA we should send a representative, but we will need to elect one first. One question for CBERRRSA is if we convince DOT or the muni to pay a private contractor to plow Eklutna Lake Road, will that cost be added solely to our taxes or be spread among the whole RRSA. Eklutna Lake Road is used by more non-residents than residents.

Rick has also asked our Assembly person Kevin Cross to get involved and he is looking into possible answers. Rep. Saddler mentioned that we might form our own RRSA. We can explore that idea when we get on the CBERRRSA board. If the CBERRRSA cannot help us, then we could take matters into our own hands. The downside might be that our rather small community would then be expected to pay for all of our own road maintenance, which could be more than we pay now, and we would have to elect our own RRSA board of supervisors.

Cell tower. Rep. Saddler has seen our plea for help in obtaining a cell tower in Eklutna Valley. The benefits to residents, people who have problems on Eklutna Lake Road, and park visitors are obvious. Rep. Saddler said he and his chief of staff are looking for sources of funding as well as other alternatives, such as Starlink. We told him to let us know if he needs any help from our community.

Incident reports. We were running late so this regular agenda item was not discussed.

NEW BUSINESS

Representative Dan Saddler. Rep. Saddler wasn't on the agenda because he only belatedly realized he could attend that day. He gave us a rundown on several big issues that needed to be addressed in the next legislative session including more money for education, pensions, and the concern that natural gas was going to run out in a few years based on predictions and that the state might need to build a gas pipeline or import gas. He stuck around for the whole meeting and was able to offer some helpful advice on other issues. He likes to hear from constituents and encourages anyone with questions or comments to call (907-465-3783) or email him at Rep.Dan.Saddler@akleg.gov.

Eklutna Community Clinic. Kyle Robillard, with the Native Village of Eklutna, told us the clinic is open to all. They have a physician's assistant on duty and are able to handle the normal functions of a health clinic, including vaccinations. They require appointments for non-emergency care.

Restoration of Eklutna River and Eklutna Lake. Kyle gave a brief summary of the Eklutna lake and river restoration project. The Native Village of Eklutna (NVE) has been an active participant in the planning effort but doesn't believe its concerns are being addressed by the Eklutna hydro project owners, who are paying for the study plan. NVE's primary goal is to rehabilitate the entire river so that salmon runs comparable to historic levels are restored. The project owners' main concern has been to protect profits. During the planning process, NVE asked that fish ladders be added to the storage dam and enough water be allowed to flow over the dam year-round to sustain salmon spawning and rearing downstream. The owner's draft plan published in October picked the least costly alternative, providing a "portal" at the AWWU pump station located in the Eklutna River canyon a mile downstream from the dam. This would leave a mile of the river dry and would not allow salmon into the lake and its upstream tributaries. The project owners also argued that hydroelectricity was a valuable alternate energy source. To counter the owner's preferred alternative, the NVE noted that the hydropower plant generates 40 megawatts but that as much as 200 megawatts of other alternative energy projects are expected to become operational in the next decade. The NVE has now proposed

removing the storage dam entirely over the course of the next decade, as alternative energy comes into the railbelt energy grid. Under this scenario, enough water would be allowed to flow out of the lake to sustain downstream spawning and rearing and to ensure passage into and out of the lake and its upstream tributaries. Removing the storage dam would be much cheaper than removing the diversion dam, which was accomplished by the Conservation Fund and NVE in 2018. In fact, the Conservation Fund has already volunteered to pay for the removal of the storage dam, thereby saving the project owners (and their customers and local taxpayers) a large upfront cost.

Rick added other details but there is no need to belabor them in the minutes because the important points were listed in the resolution that was adopted during this meeting. Suffice it to say that it seemed important to support the NVE, as we are the two communities most affected by the loss of salmon and subsequent degradation of the valley's ecosystem. It is also important to note that the municipality owns 53% of the hydroelectric project. Rick had drafted a resolution and proposed that we discuss it and adopt it if that was agreeable. The resolution supported NVE's idea that the dam be removed, if feasible. If for some reason removal is not feasible, then the resolution would support incorporating fish ladders or other means to facilitate fish passage past the dam. The resolution also supported year-round river flow rates consistent with those recommended in the draft plan by fisheries experts, not the inadequate flow rates that the project owners proposed. Finally, the resolution recommended that the Mayor and the Assembly use the municipality's majority ownership share as leverage to accomplish those objectives.

A motion was made and seconded to read and discuss the draft resolution. After a few revisions, the resolution was adopted unanimously with one abstention.

CBERRRSA representative. During the discussion of winter road maintenance, it was determined that one possible solution required getting involved with the CBERRRSA. A motion was made and seconded that we elect a representative to the CBERRRSA board of supervisors. Teal Heller volunteered to be our representative. She was the only candidate and was elected unanimously.

CBERRRSA aquifer study. For over a decade members of the public have requested an aquifer study in the CBERRRSA. Funding for that project is now available. Presumably, the study would identify sources and amounts of underground aquifers in the Chugiak, Birchwood and Eagle River areas. Whether or not our valley will be included would be up to our CBERRRSA representative.

Election for Chugiak-Eagle River Advisory Board alternate. Bob Reagan is our representative on the CERAB. With the comprehensive plan funded, it behooves us to ensure that we are represented at meetings that Bob is unable to attend. So an alternate is important. A motion was made and seconded to elect a CERAB alternate. Teal said that she actually was more interested in that position. Margan said she would be happy to be the CBERRRSA representative in Teal's place. With a wave of his procedural wand Rick switched Teal to the CERAB alternate, after asking for and hearing no objection. Margan, being the only nominee, was elected unanimously as the CBERRRSA representative.

The meeting adjourned at about 8:50 p.m.