



GOVERNMENT HILL COMMUNITY COUNCIL

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Ms. Edrie Vinson
Environmental Project Manager
Federal Highway Administration, Alaska Division
U.S. Department of Transportation
709 West 9th Street, Room 851
P.O. Box 21648
Juneau, AK 99802

November 23, 2005

Dear Ms. Vinson,

Thank you for coming to the Government Hill Community Council meeting Thursday, November 17, 2005. The residents of Government Hill appreciated your report on the status of the EIS process, and a summary of the reasons for eliminating all alternative routes except those that pass through Government Hill.

Please understand that this letter is not to be taken as our comments on the Scoping Summary Report, but just to establish our understanding of your comments and the current situation. Should you feel that something we report here is in error, please let us know. With the apparent imminent release of a draft environmental impact statement (DEIS), using what is reported to be a “streamlined” process, it is critical that we have as accurate an understanding as possible of the current procedural and substantive situation.

Section 1.4 of the Scoping Summary Report on page 1-3, state that:

Because the proposed Knik Arm Crossing project was deemed nationally significant, FHWA selected it for participation in the NEPA TeamBuilding Initiative. The goal of this FHWA initiative is to improve the quality and timeliness of transportation development projects while ensuring stewardship of the human and natural environment. In addition, the TeamBuilding Initiative aims to assess potentially controversial impacts early in the NEPA process; use conflict-resolution techniques; build public trust through an effective public involvement process; identify opportunities to integrate innovative technology and data tools; and improve documentation of impacts from the proposed project and records.

It will be apparent from our comments here that we believe that FHWA’s EIS process is fundamentally flawed, both from the perspective of the open and transparent decision making, and also from a legal perspective. We feel that the EIS process has failed to meet the high standards put forward under the TeamBuilding Initiative.

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The EIS Process

We appreciate the encouragement you gave to Government Hill residents to participate in the EIS process in commenting on the Scoping Summary Report, rather than wait to participate until a final decision is made.

You also encouraged us to share "our creative solutions and brainpower" on mitigation efforts as well as comment on possible variations on the routes. We appreciate that we did work with KABATA and FHWA by helping draw "fat lines on a map", at a May 9, 2005 meeting convened at HDR offices. Of note, at that meeting residents requested to be part of the decision-making process through stakeholder meetings. Also at that meeting the following exchange was recorded early in the meeting:

Stephanie Kesler

Could you draw a line and construct a road through Elmendorf?

James Spell

I think it would be very difficult to build a road for civilian use through Elmendorf.

We assert that neither the Government Hill Community Council nor residents of Government Hill were allowed to participate in any meaningful way in the process that resulted in this scoping summary report. We were not involved in the interchange of ideas and brainpower that comes from actively participating and interacting directly with the other stakeholders at stakeholder meetings. As you can see with the initial exchange of questions at the May 9th meeting there was resistance by stakeholders other than the Government Hill Community Council to identify routes other than through or under Government Hill. How can we as ordinary citizens provide meaningful and creative solutions when stakeholders are not available to us to question assumptions and conclusions based on details we do not have access to?

It is during these scoping-level discussions with other stakeholders that the "fat lines" are finessed, and narrowed down to "practical" and "feasible" alternatives. Despite repeated requests for room at the "scoping" table, FHWA refused to allow us to participate in those meetings. We only have received periodic reports of the reasons why certain "fat line" routes "didn't meet the criteria." In fact, the Government Hill Community Council was not even listed as a primary stakeholder in your "Scoping Summary Report, Comments Issues and Alternatives."

As long-time residents of Government Hill, we have significant and substantive input to add to the process of identifying alternatives that can meet all reasonable and legal purpose and need criteria for a bridge. Yet FHWA has not allowed us in the room to openly participate with other stakeholders to discuss these ideas and meaningfully respond to any comments on our input. Instead, it is as if our ideas were sent into a vacuum, only to see them come out, if at all, in forms that make it obvious that our proposals were either misunderstood or mischaracterized to make them appear unreasonable.

Reasonable Alternatives

You made clear in your comments that FHWA has substantively rejected as “unreasonable” all alternatives for inclusion in the DEIS except for those that cut through Government Hill. FHWA is wrong to do so.

The Government Hill Community Council agrees with Anchorage Mayor Begich that "Your further review should lead to a complete study of the alternatives that cross Elmendorf Air Force Base. Without that in-depth review, it will be impossible to compare the cost and impacts of the Elmendorf and below-the-bluff choices."

In our view, adjustments can be made to the yellow route through Elmendorf to Boniface to minimize its impacts on the Military and meet all other criteria, including impact mitigation and cost minimization. The military also believes this to be the case, as their official position on the matter, as relayed by General Chandler in his August 31, 2005 letter, is that "Based on our rough analysis, we believe that all issues can be resolved, given appropriate funding by KABATA."

While we have yet to examine the scoping summary report in any detail, based on our previous discussions, we have serious concerns that the costs of the Boniface Route are not directly comparable to routes that dump onto the A-C couplet, and that sub-surface environmental clean-up costs have not been factored into these decisions.

Further, FHWA should also be considering the Elmendorf Variant, or slight modifications to it. Please note that most or all of the Base Housing near the Government Hill Gate to Elmendorf that would have been in the way of the Elmendorf Variant is demolished, or in the process of being demolished. What are the technical reasons why this alternative's curve near the Cherry Hill Housing on Elmendorf couldn't be moved a few feet to avoid demolishing part of that housing complex? More fundamentally, how is a “cut and cover,” or lowered road at the Elmendorf Variant at the Gate, any less "technically feasible" than the cut & cover Degan or Erickson variants?

It was stated that the West Bluff route would be a “raised viaduct”, to avoid disturbing the tank farms. A raised viaduct not only entails the highest cost way of building a road, but is a true “over-the-top” route, where a lit cigarette or a car skidding off the road could cause a huge explosion. A raised viaduct hardly meets the "common sense" criteria.

Also, the tanks in question are either empty or the oldest tanks in the tank farm. Flint Hills placed gravel fill out into the inlet a couple years ago to allow the replacement of tanks away from their existing locations. These factors support the reasonableness of an “on-the-ground” route for this alternative.

A-C Couplet and Municipality of Anchorage Impacts

The Government Hill Community Council further agrees with Anchorage Mayor Begich that "...feeding Knik Arm traffic into the A-C Couplet would have unacceptable community consequences from day one."

Yet the two alternatives FHWA are proposing pass squarely across the A-C Couplet into Downtown. That will have huge detrimental affects on the re-vitalization of Downtown that is presently underway.

The drawings shown for the connections on the Anchorage side clearly indicate 3rd Avenue as the Southern Terminus of the project, yet the major impacts that will be caused by the A-C Couplet route will actually start at 4th Avenue, just one block south! Gravel extraction, and transportation as well as construction materials and equipment will be some of the first traffic moving across the bridge. The reported estimate of 1 gravel truck every minute will have much larger impacts than if that same traffic count was a personal vehicle.

The A-C Bridge over the Rail yards has also been described as being seismically deficient. How does the "purpose and need" for "safety and system redundancy" if the access route falls down during an earthquake?

In order to minimize impacts on the Municipality of Anchorage traffic, and to minimize the additional cost and disruption of the presently proposed "2 - Phase" approach to the Knik Arm Bridge "offramps" on the Anchorage side, the Ingra-Gampbell-Glenn "Highway to Highway" connection must be constructed simultaneously with the connection to the Knik Arm Bridge.

Removal of the Earmarks

You agreed that the United State Congress will imminently remove the federal earmark for a Knik Arm bridge, and that it is thus necessary that the bridge work its way through the State of Alaska priority-setting process. Multiple media reports and comments from our federal delegation and state politicians confirm this, and also emphasize that the results of that process cannot now be known with certainty.

The state priority-setting process could of course, result in a final state decision to proceed with a bridge crossing of Knik Arm. Or, as the reports suggest, the state may determine that other transportation projects are of a higher priority than a bridge across Knik Arm. Further, the state may call for a Knik Arm crossing of a type or in a location that is not currently within the scope of the work FHWA has done to date. It is simply not possible to know the final result of the state decision until it is made through the legal process.

We don't understand why FHWA would continue with an EIS process for a project that may never be proposed. The EIS process should be put on hold until the state process is completed and the decision to fund and construct the bridge is made through that state priority-setting process. The law would also support such a result, as once the earmarks are lifted, there

is no longer a proposed project – which cannot legally exist unless and until the state makes a decision to proceed with the bridge.

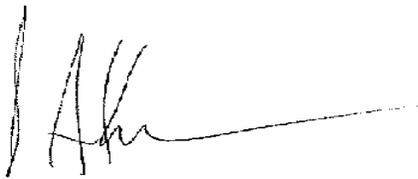
Given the national “government waste” attention associated with the bridge -- whether justified or not -- that has led to the imminent removal of the earmark, it is surprising that FHWA would support the use of federal taxpayer dollars to advance a process that either may not be needed altogether or for which the fundamental assumptions may be changed.

The TeamBuilding Initiative

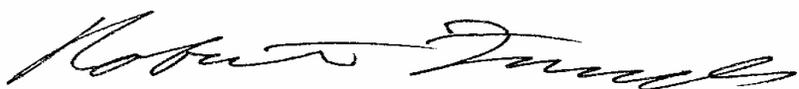
Regrettably, the situation described above leads the Government Hill community to believe that the EIS Process and Players are working towards a pre-determined Government Hill-focused conclusion. Public involvement has been marginalized, conflict resolution has not happened, public trust has not been achieved. FHWA still has the opportunity to bring the integrity to this process that common sense and the law demand, and it should do so. We thus urge you to place the EIS process on hold pending completion of the state priority-setting process. Further, regardless of when an EIS process takes place, it is not too late for FHWA to follow the directives of the TeamBuilding Initiative and use an open, collaborative, facilitated process to bring in all stakeholders to come up with alternatives that are acceptable to all. We have always felt that there were ways to construct the bridge and its connecting access routes that do not require the destruction of Anchorage's First and Oldest Neighborhood.

The law requires that you consider all reasonable alternatives in the DEIS. It appears that FHWA is poised to run afoul of this law. Please let us know if we misunderstand in any way FHWA’s approach to the process. Please also let us know if you disagree with any of the facts set out above.

Sincerely,



Stephanie Kesler, President



Robert French, Co-Vice President

Cc: Senator Ted Stevens
Senator Lisa Murkowski

GOVERNMENT HILL COMMUNITY COUNCIL
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Congressman Don Young
Governor Frank Murkowski
State Senator Johnny Ellis
State Senator Fred Dyson
State Representative Les Gara
State Representative Nancy Dahlstrom
Mayor Mark Begich
Assemblyman Allan Tesche
David Miller, Alaska Division Administrator, FHWA
George Weurch, Chairman of the Board of Directors, KABATA
Kevin Doyle, Project Manager HDR
Lisa Loy Gray, Public Involvement, URS
Federation of Community Councils