

Opinions

OPINION: Boondoggle freeway projects won't fix Anchorage

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The Scooter Avenue and Seward Highway intersection, photographed on Tuesday, Nov. 29, 2022. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

What would you like to fix in 2023? Wasteful government spending? Bicyclist and pedestrian deaths? Unmaintained streets and paths? Traffic whizzing through neighborhoods?

One South Anchorage freeway interchange project aggravates all these problems. The 92nd Avenue interchange at the Seward Highway is unneeded, unsafe, devalues neighborhoods and is hugely expensive, draining off transportation funds that could be spent elsewhere. This project should be delayed or cancelled.

Where's 92nd Avenue, you might ask? And why should I care?

92nd Avenue is just south of Dimond Boulevard. West of the Seward Highway, it's called Scooter Drive. East of the Seward Highway, it's called Academy Drive, and connects a family neighborhood of trailer parks and small homes to Brayton Drive.

Occasionally, residents will run across the Seward Highway to reach the Dimond Center shopping area. The Alaska Department of Transportation's (DOT's) "solution" is to build a full freeway interchange, with an underpass and two roundabouts. The project website is <http://www.sewardhighway.info>.

Anchorage should be outraged by this wasteful freeway interchange.

First, the huge cost. This is, by far, the most expensive roadway project in the Anchorage Bowl in the next four years. This is part of a \$200 million freeway expansion that includes additional highway lanes.

Second, this interchange does not prioritize safety. While DOT claims that pedestrian safety is a primary issue, the proposed interchange is designed for heavy traffic and speeds up to 50 mph. The 92nd Interchange proposes a bike lane on the shoulder of Brayton Drive where there is a history of injuries and death. The design directs children from the youth soccer fields onto sidewalks adjoining high-speed lanes. Roundabout crosswalks will have free-flowing traffic up to 35 mph, or faster. With those traffic speeds, pedestrians who are hit have a 50% chance of severe injury or death.

Third, additional road lanes are not needed here. Freeway expansion is not needed on this part of the Seward Highway corridor until 2050, according to DOT's own traffic projections. DOT first approved the interchange in 2002. Twenty years later, retail options and commute patterns have changed dramatically. Traffic has been flat or declining on East Dimond Boulevard, Abbott Road and the Seward Highway (per Alaska traffic data and the 2022 Seward to Glenn Planning and Environmental Linkage study).

But is there any harm in building excess road capacity? Yes! Building more lanes and interchanges invites more driving and more speeding. That in turn brings more crashes, pollution, urban sprawl, reduced property values and health issues — as well as significant maintenance costs.

Fourth, expanding the freeway would damage the adjoining neighborhood. The interchange would channel new traffic onto Academy and Vanguard Drives. These quiet neighborhood roads would become a cut-through for Independence Park and the Hillside, bringing much greater traffic volume and speeds. Part of the adjacent youth soccer fields are to be condemned.

The interchange would divert people away from the neighborhood commercial center along West Abbott, contradicting the municipality's effort to build vibrant, walkable neighborhood centers. Transportation projects can add economic value to

neighborhoods and town centers, or it can kill them. This is Big Government degrading neighborhoods with freeway expansion.

Fifth, driving times are not shortened. This new interchange will not save time for drivers. There would be no reduction in driving time from most Abbott neighborhoods to Dimond Center. In fact, many drivers would have longer travel time on the new interchange design. The new southbound onramp would be a half-mile longer and pass through a new roundabout.

So, how did this 92nd Avenue freeway get funded if it's not needed, unsafe and hugely expensive?

The Anchorage Assembly has opposed this project for years, including Resolution 254 in 2022. Unfortunately, the Alaska DOT wields lopsided power over designing major roadways in Anchorage, and they dismiss the Assembly's opposition.

Anchorage residents have made it clear for decades that they want transportation that is safer, healthier and economically sensible. It's time for DOT to begin helping.

Speak up to:

- Your Anchorage Assembly members, who you can email at wwwmas@muni.org. Ask them to recommend canceling or delaying the interchange and the freeway expansion at their February 7 meeting. The Assembly will discuss this under Item 13D, AR 2022-400, regarding the Anchorage Metropolitan Area Transportation System's Transportation Improvement Program.
- Alaska DOT Commissioner Ryan Anderson, whose office phone is 907-465-3900. DOT can work with the Federal Highway Administration to close out the interchange and additional freeway lanes. DOT is issuing a record number of other contracts this year to keep its contractors busy.
- Your Alaska legislators. The Alaska Legislature should audit this project as part of its stance against wasteful spending. The Anchorage Legislative Information Office phone number is 907-269-0111.

Anchorage residents, this is a huge, wasteful project that defies common sense. Please let your elected representatives know that you oppose the 92nd Avenue interchange and freeway lane expansion. Tell them about safer, healthier, cleaner transportation projects that reflect your priorities for fixing Anchorage.

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