

# Correspondence



## **RABBIT CREEK COMMUNITY COUNCIL (RCCC)** A Forum for Respectful Communication & Community Relations



**1057 West Fireweed Lane, Suite 100 / Anchorage, AK 99503**

December 8, 2023

Dear Safer Seward Highway Team:

We appreciate the efforts by the Project Team to present the Safer Seward Highway (SSH) context and draft concepts to the public this month. Some Rabbit Creek Community Council (RCCC) members attended the December 4<sup>th</sup> Anchorage Open House or looked at the project roll-out on the Safer Seward Highway website. They brought several good questions to our recent Land Use and Transportation (LUT) Committee meeting.

First, two comments:

Comment period deadline – we note that the SSH website indicates the online Open House is open for comments through January 4, 2024. Please clarify to our SSH Working Group and on the website whether that is a deadline for this current comment period, or if it is another date.

Map access - while our Council members found the interactive maps very useful, they were initially hard to find on the website. Can this map feature be prominently noted near the top of the home page?

Following is a compilation of our LUT Committee and member questions.

### Specific to Potter Marsh and Potter Valley Road

1. Noise information at Potter Marsh  
What are the calculated decibels at various distances where the Highway passes Potter Marsh, south to Potter Weigh station? A noise map is important to understand the impacts to species in the Marsh and to neighbors. Noise increases with vehicle speeds; thus it is useful to look at several noise maps based on varying traffic speeds.
2. Explain the turning movements and wait times at Potter Marsh under the various designs  
The four-lane divided alternative seems to rely on cars eddying out in the median. This does not seem safe or practical.
3. Add the proposed Potter Marsh Watershed Park as a new destination that will affect traffic at the Potter Valley Road intersection.
4. Traffic counts and projections for Potter Valley Road and for travel on Old Seward Highway  
Residents want to know the spill-over effects onto the Old Seward Highway east of

Potter Marsh, anticipated because of the possible delays and safety perceptions at the Seward Highway intersection, as well as the possible new access patterns for a Turnagain Arm Trail parking lot and Potter Marsh Watershed Park.

### Highway footprint questions

1. Visual depiction of cut and fill, with comparisons to the existing rock wall near Bird Creek. More visuals are needed for the public to understand the scale of changes to the landscape. We suggest three-dimensional graphics of the cut and fill, as well as numerical height comparisons of the cliff faces. The website has road-level photos that might serve as the basis for this. This arises from the alarm of some of our residents at the scale of cut and fill that detracts from the scenic natural setting. That loss appears to include the loss of almost all natural shoreline.
2. What determines the amount of quarrying: rockfall safety, or materials source? What sections have been analyzed for shed-roof-style rockfall protection or tunneling to minimize quarrying, what are the options for a combination of rock removal and rock catchment?
3. Decking or stacking What analysis was made of sections of stacked highway to reduce the footprint? This is common on bridges and in some cities. If none, can this be a partial solution to reduce the footprint? Could this be particularly helpful and safer at pinch points where cars enter/exit the highway?
4. Railroad in the median Bureaucratic turf battles aside, what would the footprint be to put the railroad between the lanes? We recognize that traditionally there is a specified right-of-way separating the highway from the railroad, but other cities have overcome this issue. The railroad is located in a highway median in many urban areas, such as Portland (The Max), the L in Chicago, and in Los Angeles.
5. Sea-level rise and storm conditions from human-caused climate change What is the level of fill and the relation of fill to sea level? What is the range of projections for sea level rise along the highway? Regarding the rate of isostatic rebound—what scientific evidence is there that uplift will match sea-level rise?

### Safety and Need questions

1. Please provide the formulas that show the statistical trade-off between speed-related risk and sight-line related risk Long sightlines help drivers avoid some crashes, but long sightlines allow and encourage higher speeds. Speed results in more crashes, and higher severity crashes. For the public to think that a design increases safety, the public needs to know the cause-and-effect statistical relationships of speed and sightlines and crashes.
2. What and who determines speed limits? A project engineer told one of us: “The speed limit is a function of traffic mixing and merging, not the sightlines on the curves.” We need to hear more about this. If traffic mixing is the guiding factor, is mixing and merging more controlled by four lanes or three lanes or two lanes? This is not intuitive, because four lanes allow more lane-changing.

3. Explain the Safety Corridor Study crash data—specific crash causes  
Crashes decreased when the Safety Corridor was declared in 2006. But crashes have increased since then, especially in winter. The Corridor study attributes some amount of crash increases to low staffing (troopers) and to limits on winter maintenance. Can crashes be quantified by underlying cause?
4. What was the crash rate in the slow-speed zones of the rockfall projects, where jersey barriers were used in 2022-2023?
5. Comparative fatality rate for this highway and other roadways and intersections  
How does the fatality rate on the Seward Highway compare to other highways and intersections in the region? For example, if the accident rate is 1 fatality per 800,000 trips at Indian (please provide the actual rate), what is the comparison for various other fatality patterns, such as on the Sterling Highway or on urban arterials in Anchorage?

#### Cost burden and Affordability questions

1. What is the total increase in lane miles and maintenance surface for a divided four-lane, versus three-lane, versus two-lane? This total should include access roads and pullouts.
2. What are total maintenance cost estimates for this project? Provide a comparison of future costs for divided four-lane, three-lane, and two-lane. How does this compare to current costs for this stretch of highway?
3. Provide a picture of DOTPF maintenance funding levels relative to maintenance needs, historically and currently.
4. What projections do DOTPF Maintenance Managers have regarding future funding adequacy for maintenance of this project, given regionwide needs?
5. What has been the budget and hours logged for law enforcement on the Seward Highway from Potter to Girdwood over the years? How has this varied, and what percentage of the agency budget has this been? Quantify the amount of time for traffic patrolling on the highway, to give an indication of enforcement capability.

#### Opportunity Costs

1. Is a no-build alternative still in the analysis? If not, why not?
2. Given the \$800 million price tag (or more), who and how is it decided that this project is the best investment in Alaska's future?
3. Give the public a menu of the alternatives  
Our residents have many questions on the scale and the return on investment for this project, versus the opportunity cost. There are so many needs for Alaska transportation funds; and Alaskans must build infrastructure for a very different future than we see today. We would like a menu of other projects from the AMATS Metropolitan Transportation Plan, the municipal plans, or Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facility's plans, that could be funded if this project did not require \$800 million in the next 5 years.

In addition, our residents have ideas for new projects that might not be in current adopted plans but that offer big economic, environmental and land use payoffs:

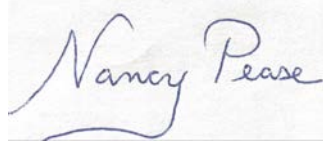
- Connectivity to geo-thermal energy sources along western Cook Inlet
- Railroad link to Canada
- Commuter rail to the Mat-Su or Girdwood
- A suite of ten, \$80-million projects in Anchorage instead of one \$800 million (if SSH no-build)
- A suite of ten, \$40-million projects in Anchorage (if this SSH were half the scale)
- What about segmenting and phasing this \$800 million project out over 10 or more years, so other projects in Anchorage can also leap ahead and spur economic recovery?

We hope the SSH Project Team can provide answers to most of these questions this coming week, in time for the Stakeholder Working Group meeting, after which we can follow up with our members at the RCCC monthly meeting – both are on December 14<sup>th</sup>. The Project Team's answers will help our members provide constructive comments during the current comment period. Thank you for your work and we look forward to our continued participation in the Working Group.

Sincerely,



Co-chair, RCCC



Co-chair, Land Use & Transportation Comm