

# Southeast Alaska Transportation Network

An overview of land and sea  
transportation development  
opportunities

Presented by  
First Things First  
Alaska Foundation



## Southeast's Transportation Challenges

Southeast Alaska presents a myriad of transportation challenges. The region includes 70,000 residents in more than a dozen isolated communities scattered along thousands of miles of rugged coastline exposed to extreme marine weather conditions.

The Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS) was founded in 1962 to connect the region's communities to one another and to continental road systems. The AMHS evolved into a marine transportation system with 11 vessels carrying 320,000 passengers and nearly 110,000 vehicles annually in Southeast Alaska, Prince William Sound, and Southwest Alaska. AMHS serves as essential transportation infrastructure for many of the region's smaller communities, providing important year-round passenger, vehicle, and freight service.

However, AMHS ridership generates only about one-third of the revenue necessary to fund the system's \$160 million operating budget. With steadily declining resources to fund AMHS and other State operations, it is essential that all opportunities to develop more sustainable regional transportation infrastructure be pursued. Absent that, the long-term sustainability of AMHS is uncertain, as is its capacity to continue service where it is most needed.

***"The large operating budget required by AMHS results in Southeast Region requiring significantly more Maintenance and Operations (M&O) funding than other regions despite having the smallest population."***

***"Because of the high cost of maintaining and operating the AMHS, it is particularly vulnerable to changes in legislative appropriations whether the result of oil production declines, population changes, etc."***

– 2014 Draft South Alaska Transportation Plan (SATP)

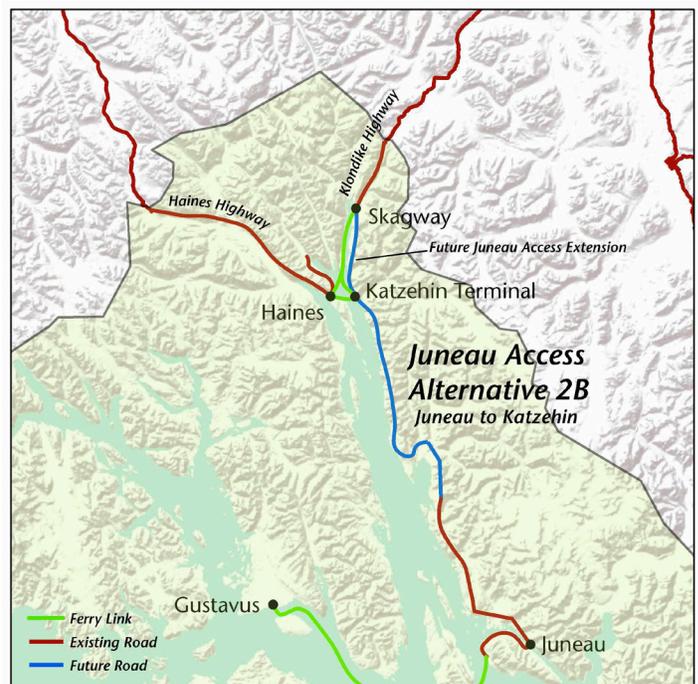
FTFAF believes a critical long-term regional transportation strategy must include greater development of Southeast Alaska's road system. Road system development begins with Juneau Access, a project that is partially-funded and nearly NEPA-ready. Beyond Juneau Access, a road connecting Sitka and Warm Spring Bay on the east side of Baranof Island would create important AMHS savings. These and other road development projects,

described below, present opportunities to fundamentally improve transportation connections within the region and to the continental road system.

### Juneau Access

The effort to build a road connecting Juneau to the continental highway system is at a critical juncture. Planning for the first phases of the Juneau road project is in the final stages of the environmental impact statement (EIS) process. The Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF), in consultation with the Federal Highway Administration, is preparing the Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (FSEIS) in 2016 and will issue a Record of Decision (ROD). Based on the ROD, final steps can be taken to secure necessary permits and begin construction.

The DSEIS document notes that Juneau is the largest North American community not connected to the continental highway system. Further, current AMHS service meets only about 7 percent of the demand for travel in Lynn Canal. It would meet even less of that demand in the future if service is further reduced.



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DOTPF's preferred alternative is Alternative 2B, which includes widening Glacier Highway from Echo Cove to Cascade Point (2.9 miles) and construction of a new highway from Cascade Point to a point just north of the Katzeihin River delta (48 miles). From there, shuttle ferries would travel to Skagway and Haines with a new terminal at Katzeihin.

While the current generation of the Juneau Access Improvement project does not consider road construction beyond Katzeihin, the long term goal is the development of a road connection to the continental road system. The greatest economic benefit for the northern Southeast region will come from unconstrained highway access to the North American road system, i.e. a con

***"The [Juneau Access] road will enable as much as a tenfold increase in travel in and out of Juneau thus improving access between the Capital City, the Yukon and Interior Alaska."***

—2014 Draft SATP

## Sitka Access

Providing frequent ferry service to Sitka has always been a challenge for AMHS. Travel from Chatham Strait through Peril, Olga and Neva Straits is a 120 nautical mile, 12-hour roundtrip voyage for conventional hull ferries. Scheduling is complicated by tidal and current constraints on navigation.

Two options have been considered for improving access to Sitka, including constructing a 49-mile road to a Rodman Bay ferry terminal or an 18-mile road to a Warm Spring Bay terminal on the east side of Baranof Island. Either option would significantly shorten ferry travel times to Sitka from both Juneau and Petersburg. In the Draft 2014 Southeast Alaska Transportation Plan, Warm Spring Bay is identified as the preferred option. The plan notes that upon completion the Warm Spring Bay road could be designated as a National Highway System (NHS) route because it provides a connection between a major airport in Sitka and an important ferry route.

## North Panhandle Road Network Development

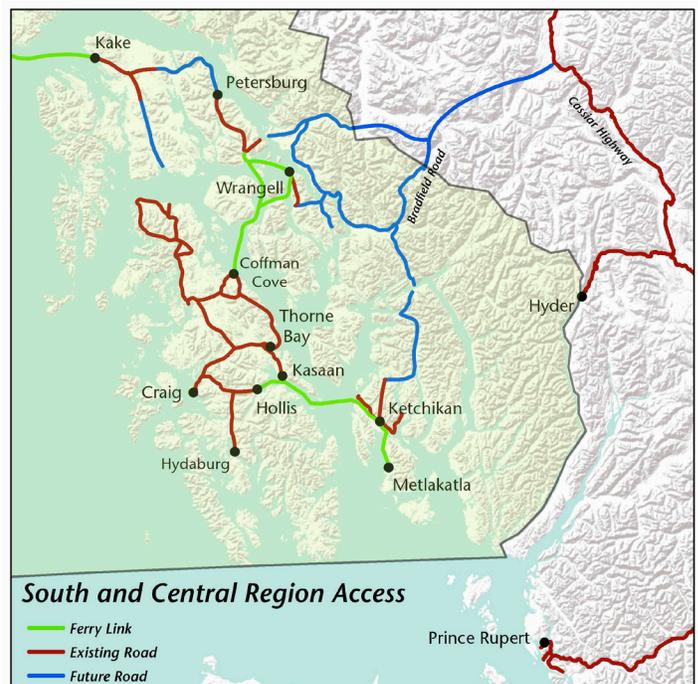
Several transportation planning studies have considered dayboat service options between Juneau, Hoonah, Gustavus, Tenakee, Angoon, and Sitka. A key aspect of the concept is the use of existing road infrastructure on Chichagof Island. Roads constructed years ago in support of logging operations extend over much of the island. With upgrades and extensions, the network could serve to connect the island's communities with a single ferry terminal located near Chatham Strait. Opportunities for improving transportation in the northern Panhandle also



include the concept of a terminal in Hawk Inlet on Admiralty Island using an existing road connection across Admiralty Island to Young Bay and a ferry connection from there to Douglas Island.

## South and Central Region Access

For many years, transportation planners have studied opportunities to connect Petersburg, Wrangell, and Ketchikan with the continental road system, originally via a road part-way



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up the Stikine River valley. More recent analysis has focused on a route via Bradfield Canal. A Bradfield Canal road would tie in with British Columbia's Cassiar Highway. A ferry terminal near the head of Bradfield Canal would support shuttle ferry linkages with nearby terminals and roads to Wrangell to the northwest and Ketchikan to the south.

Also in the central part of Southeast, the Kake Access project is a proposed road and shuttle ferry connection linking Petersburg and Kake. Relying extensively on existing road beds, the road would transect northern Kupreanof Island, with a short shuttle ferry connection across Wrangell Narrows. The road would give Kake residents better access to regional air and marine transportation services.

## National Forest System Roads

A central element of improving surface transportation infrastructure in Southeast is taking greater advantage of the extensive regional network of National Forest System (NFS) roads. According to the September 2012 U.S. Forest Service Alaska Region Long Range Transportation Plan, there are 3,693 miles of NFS roads in Southeast Alaska. This includes 439 miles of road maintained for passenger vehicle traffic, 1,920 miles suitable for "high clearance" vehicles, and 1,334 miles that are closed or in "storage" status. Redeveloping and improving portions of this road system would have important benefits across the region, including enhanced access to the Chichagof Island communities of Sitka, Kake, Wrangell, and Ketchikan. The NFS road network made it possible to serve all of Prince of Wales Island from a single ferry terminal in Hollis.

## The Dayboat Boat/Shuttle Ferry Advantage

Expansion of the region's road network will make it possible to take advantage of opportunities to connect communities with dayboats or shuttle ferries. Dayboats are lower-cost options than traditional longhaul vessels operating 24 hours per day, seven



MV Lituya, photo courtesy of Coastwise Corporation.

days a week. AMHS's MV Lituya service, which links Metlakatla with Ketchikan, and InterIsland Ferry Authority (IFA) service connecting Ketchikan and Prince of Wales Island, provide examples of how vessels can be sized and operated to best meet local needs. Though dayboats or shuttle ferries may not be fully self-supporting from fares, they can operate at lower-cost than vessels requiring 24 hour crews and accommodations.

## Summary

Professional transportation planners recognize the opportunities and potential benefits associated with expansion of Southeast's road network. ADOTPF's 2014 Draft Southeast Alaska Transportation Plan includes Juneau Access, Sitka Access, and a road connecting Kake and Petersburg. Transportation planning efforts conducted over the past 30 years have all identified a range of road development opportunities for the region. The benefits of these projects include:

- Lower-cost passenger and freight transportation opportunities
- Better connection to the continental road system
- More sustainable ferry service where it is most needed
- Economic development opportunities associated with improved access to natural resources
- Enhanced opportunities for commercial use of public land by the visitor industry
- Expanded recreational opportunities for residents

Recognizing that years of planning, permitting, and funding effort are required to bring transportation projects to fruition, FTFAF believes now is the time to act, beginning with Juneau Access, but also taking the next necessary steps to advance other projects. More efficient movement of freight and passengers on the water and over highways will be critical to sustaining and enhancing the economic well-being of Southeast Alaska.



## About First Things First Alaska Foundation

First Things First Alaska Foundation (FTFAF) is dedicated to preserving the economic viability and future of Alaska through education. FTFAF works to educate the public by monitoring and researching natural resource management issues, and by highlighting reasonable use, access, economic opportunities, and development; all of which can be done while protecting the environment. FTFAF promotes public understanding of the facts regarding resource issues, whether they be mining, timber, fishing, or tourism, and encourages the public to participate in the decision making process. To learn more about FTFAF go to [www.ftffoundation.org](http://www.ftffoundation.org).