

Roads and Highways Advisory Board Conference
Meeting Minutes
August 9, 2019

Meeting called to order by Chair, Dan Hall

PARTICIPANTS:

Board Members:

Present: Donna Gardino, Daniel Hall, Howard Thies, Tony Johansen

Excused Absent: Scott Eickholt, Aves Thompson

Unexcused Absent: John Baker

DOT&PF: Commissioner John MacKinnon, Marie Heidemann, Eric Taylor

FHWA: Sandra Gracia-Aline

DNR: Kris Hess, Jeanne Proulx, Clark Cox, Lee Cole

Public: Wolfgang Junge, Diana Rotkis, Ben Coleman

Telephone Participants: Kris Heiss, Jennie Crew, Jack Lafox

Approval of Agenda: Motion: Donna Gardino makes the motion to approve, Howard seconds.

Approval of Minutes: Motion: Donna Gardino makes the motion to approve, Howard seconds.

Public Comments: No public comment was made

Chair Remarks:

Chair Dan Hall thanked all of those who were able to attend the meeting. He also sent out his thanks to the legislatures and Governor for passing the capital budget. Mr. Hall congratulated board member Aves Thompson, who has recently retired after 40 years of serving the State of Alaska, and our states highways.

Board Discussion:

Comments from Commissioner MacKinnon

Restored matched funds to a level that gave us some latitude. Commissioner MacKinnon informed the board that Program Development now has a director. Ben White. There was a backlog to projects within that division, but Commissioner MacKinnon believes that Mr. White and his team are now caught up with everything. Member Dan hall mentioned that there isn't a lot of bids out there. Commissioner Mackinnon spoke about all of the hoops you now have to jump through to get a project out to construction, compared to how you did it in the past. Mr. MacKinnon also mentioned that some projects are more complex than others, and each Region is different in the sense of what's on their plate. The construction is lower this year than he has seen in recent years. Each project goes into different phases. One of his goals is for the Ad-Hoc Transportation, not just the three silos together. Having the regions work together on getting their projects out.

State of Alaska Owned Material Sites – DNR

DNR has been working on their communication with DOT&PF to minimize and eliminate the issues between the two agencies. DNR is excited to be working closely with DOT&PF, and believe they have improved with their communications.

Status of the Ad-Hoc Transportation Advisory Board

Commissioner MacKinnon had mentioned how DOT&PF are working as independent silos. We have an Aviation, Highways, and Marine side of things. They are not looking at the other aspects. Forty-four of the states have one board that looks at all modules of transportation. Those boards make recommendations of what the projects and programs should be. Commissioner would like to combine the three boards, and have them act like one transportation advisory board. Having this would give you more continuity with making better decisions by looking at all three modes. The Commissioner's goal is to start this ad hoc board later this year. Right now the department's priority is dealing with the Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS). They are going to develop a level of system with AMHS. His goal is to have better coordination & a board that is looking at all three modes, and make recommendations that would prevent having projects being turned on and off constantly which is costly. First thing to do for the ad hoc board to talk about, will be the Northern Economics report on AMHS. Late fall to get the board together and first talk about the marine transportation (first to address).

FHWA Presentation

Sandra Garcia-Aline spoke with the board, regarding the direction that the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) is taking, and giving them a quick briefing of the office in the State of Alaska. FHWA is currently facing a new Transportation Bill. They currently do not know what will pass. With the new Transportation Bill, Ms. Garcia-Aline thinks there will be a lot of focus on structurally deficient bridges. There has been a lot of questions being asked at the National level regarding this topic. The Buy America Act is an issue and is continuing to be an issue with getting waivers put through. Ms. Garcia-Aline mentioned that this has been a challenge for FHWA. The Transportation Bill might shape it up a bit, but everyone will need to wait and see. A big challenge for FHWA right now is capturing the knowledge of those who have worked in this line of business before they leave. FHWA has a new strategic plan that aligns closely with the US DOT strategic plan. FHWA is risk based, which means they are under a tight enterprise risk management framework that they just went underway about two years ago. They have always been risk based, but from an enterprise perspective, it is relatively new to FHWA. They are for safety, infrastructure, and accountability. Accountability is not everyone meeting the requirements. It's more on building efficiency. FHWA put in a lot of effort in the past 10 years, and have put a lot of effort towards efficient project delivery. Putting a list of what they can do to make it work with the state to be able to continue work and deliver projects more efficiently. Oversee state DOT projects with as little "hands on" as possible with more of a programmatic stand point regarding program and projects reviews. They do delegate to the state whenever possible and are very focused on Knowledge Management. How do we capture the institutional knowledge of those leaving? 50% of the FHWA team has had changed over. Now it's about transferring that institutional knowledge to the new team. Focused on external and internal partners. The budget constraints is a concern for FHWA. FHWA does not pick the projects, but they do come to the table to help see a started project come to the finish line.

One of the challenges for FHWA is governed by three different sects of regulations which makes it challenging. The tribal transportation program is very federal flexible, but the federal aid program is not flexible. It makes it hard for the tribes to know what they need to do and the sustainability of trying to deliver what they started. They don't like seeing projects start, and then go away, because of their level of investment. They really want to make sure the level of the investment gets to the end product of construction. That's their focus, and what Sandra's 16 member team is trying to do.

Freight Program Funding Allocation Process (Sterling Highway)

The board discussed with DOT&PF representatives about how the department processes projects that go into the freight program.

Board member Donna Gardino would like to know from DOT&PF, what process is being used when selecting the Sterling Highway projects. Ms. Gardino mentioned that she can see a lot of money going into the freight program, but the projects are not being identified in the STIP. She believes there are other priorities that the non National Highway System (NHS) freight routes within the state that could use that money. Marie Heidemann, DOT&PF responded that there is a process that DOT&PF currently uses when they select the projects. Ms. Heidemann informed the board that in the next alteration of the STIP, DOT&PF is going to create a unique fund code. Eric Taylor mentioned that one of the factors that drives the project selection, is the national freight performance measure. Which is the truck travel reliability index. DOT&PF's obligation is to look at the selection of projects which tends to improve the performance measure.

One of the challenges for the metropolitan areas, is coming up with projects that will be eligible for the freight funding, and making a case for why the freight funding should be spent on those particular projects which will help DOT&PF make the national performance measure. One of DOT&PF's difficulties in making their decisions from the data list they receive from Federal Highways, is looking at a particular segment, and figuring out what is causing this segment to be considered in the reliable range, or outside of that range. Mr. Taylor noted that there can be lot of factors. Project construction or a vehicle accident that slows down the traffic can be one of the factors, when they are looking at a segment.

Right now they are doing that through their HPMS analyst. They get a list of data from Federal Highways Administration.

Looking at a particular segment, and seeing what kind of range, some reasons can be construction, or vehicle accidents for reason of traffic congestion.

Currently SOA does not have a Statewide Freight Committee. Goal to help
There was one that happened temporarily. Get reoccurring meetings. Individual parts already exists. They just need to get together.

Travel time reliability index projects. Looking at active projects
Dalton Highway might

Reinstate the Alaska Exemption

The board had previously discussed to reinstate the Alaska State Exemption, from the previous meeting, but the board had questions that were not answered. Ms. Gardino is in favor of reinstating the Alaska exemption, because she believes in doing so, it would give the state more flexibility in distributing the Surface Transportation Block Grant (STBG) monies around the state. Ms. Heidemann states that from the fund distribution side, DOT&PF will need to figure out a new distribution formula, if the Alaska Exemption becomes reinstated. However, she is not sure if this will be a benefit or be flexible as Ms. Gardino says it will be. Ms. Heidemann stated that it's a lot more money to build roads in the rural areas. If they open the distribution to all of Alaska, there will be a lot more competition from the rural and urban areas, which means that those in the middle, won't get much help. She also stated that won't be enough funding to provide all of the needs. Despite what Ms. Heidemann says, the board believes that it will be better to distribute between all of Alaska, and that it's an exercise worth trying. Ms. Heidemann

mentioned that the STBG draft will be coming out soon for comments. The board has requested to receive a copy, and requested to pursue this discussion with Commissioner MacKinnon.

Board Comments

Next Meeting: November 1, 2019 8:00am – 12:00pm

Adjourn