



# Director's Quarterly

Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities

Winter Edition

February 2016

## Director's Message

With the Legislature in session, budget discussions have been a common topic of conversation recently. These conversations can be difficult as the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, like other state departments, faces more budget cuts for the next fiscal year.

With so much going on, it can sometimes be difficult to know where to begin when answering questions about the department's budget from family, friends and the public.

Here are a few points to remember:

1. Our department impacts every Alaskan

Northern Region Director David Miller has been with the department since 2013, serving as Maintenance and Operations Director until this spring. He has over 35 years of maintenance, operations and construction experience in the public and private sectors.



2. DOT&PF's General Fund budget was reduced by 12.5% (\$34.6 million) in fiscal every day. Of DOT&PF's Unrestricted General Fund budget, 96 percent goes toward direct services, and 4 percent goes to support services.

3. There is no cushion left to absorb cuts. Significant budget reductions in fiscal year 2017 and beyond will impact the services DOT&PF provides Alaskans.

One final point to remember is a lot can happen during the legislative session, and the proposed reductions and changes remain proposals until the budget is finalized. However it shakes out, though, our department will continue to do its best with the resources provided.

## Proposed maintenance station closures and public meetings

Last month, myself and other Northern Region staff held community engagement meetings throughout the region. We set up these meetings to lead a dialogue with residents about the fiscal challenges facing this department and to discuss impacts of proposed cuts to our budget.

One major effect of those cuts is that we likely will need to close or reduce operations at maintenance camps in this region. In fiscal year 2016, the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities saw a \$34.6 million reduction in general fund operations. Because of this, we cut non-essentials, reducing funding for overtime, reducing equipment and eliminating 96 positions. Under Gov. Bill Walker's current proposed budget for fiscal year 2017, our department faces a \$12.7 million reduction in general fund operations. This means our department will need to eliminate 52 positions, reduce equipment even more, and also close or reduce operations at six maintenance stations.

The camps that would close are: Northway Maintenance Station, O'Brien Creek Maintenance Station, Chitina Maintenance Station, Birch Lake Maintenance Station and Central Maintenance Station. The Thompson Pass Maintenance Station would become a seasonal camp, only operating during winter months.

We held the public meetings in the communities most affected by the closures — Northway, Tok, Kenny Lake, Valdez, Salcha and Central — and also in Fairbanks. We had a large turnout at most of these meetings with residents providing input on the

closure plan and our budget and also asking questions focused on specific camps.

One of the most common questions we heard was why we chose the stations we did. The proposal to close maintenance stations was not made lightly. Those stations mean a lot to the communities they serve, to the employees who staff them and to the department as a whole. To choose which stations would close, we evaluated all maintenance station closures within the region based on the following criteria:

- Average annual daily traffic near the station;
- Roadway priority;
- Lane miles per employee;
- Minimum staffing levels (We set a minimum number of employees per shift for safety reasons);
- Storm severity along the route served by the station; and
- Condition and adjacency of maintenance stations.

After this review, the listed stations were selected to minimize the impacts on all Alaskans while allowing all roadways to remain open, which directly supports our mission to "Keep Alaska Moving through service and infrastructure."

For more information about the community engagement meetings, please visit our meetings website, <http://1.usa.gov/1SHmz9I>. On this website, you have access to our meeting presentation, comments from attendees, a video of the meeting in Tok and more information about the maintenance stations.

### Frequently asked questions

**Question: "If you close the maintenance station, will you close the road?"** Answer: No. At the current proposed budget level, all roads will remain open but can expect to see an increase in response time for maintenance activities. Maintenance of the roads in the areas of the closed station will become the responsibility of nearby stations. For example: When the Birch Lake station closes, the Delta and Fairbanks stations will split the miles previously maintained by the Birch Lake station.

**Question: "Are all maintenance personnel at the closed maintenance stations being laid off?"** Answer: No. Not all positions will be laid off. Some positions will be transferred to nearby stations.

**Question: "Why are only maintenance and operations employees being cut?"** Answer: Maintenance and operations staff are state funded; other positions within the department are federally funded. Every state in the nation agrees to the same provisions when accepting federal dollars. Federal funds may only be used to plan, design and construct state transportation infrastructure and the state must pay for the maintenance and operation of that infrastructure.

Answers to other frequently asked questions can be seen in the box above.

## Fox spring

It has been about seven months since we announced our intent to transfer maintenance of Fox spring to another entity. Here is a brief update on that process and where it stands right now.

A little background first: In July 2015, we announced that we were pursuing the transfer of maintenance of Fox spring as a way to reduce our department's budget. There are no operating funds for Fox spring, so to keep the facility open, our department has repeatedly diverted funding intended



for other buildings and roads.

We thus created a plan to transition the department away from maintaining the facility. The goal is to find another

entity that could fund maintenance of the facility and ensure it stays open for residents.

This fall, we reached out to the Bureau of Land Management, Department of Natural Resources and Fairbanks North Star Borough giving each the opportunity to take over the property at no cost. As of last week, all three entities have declined taking the facility.

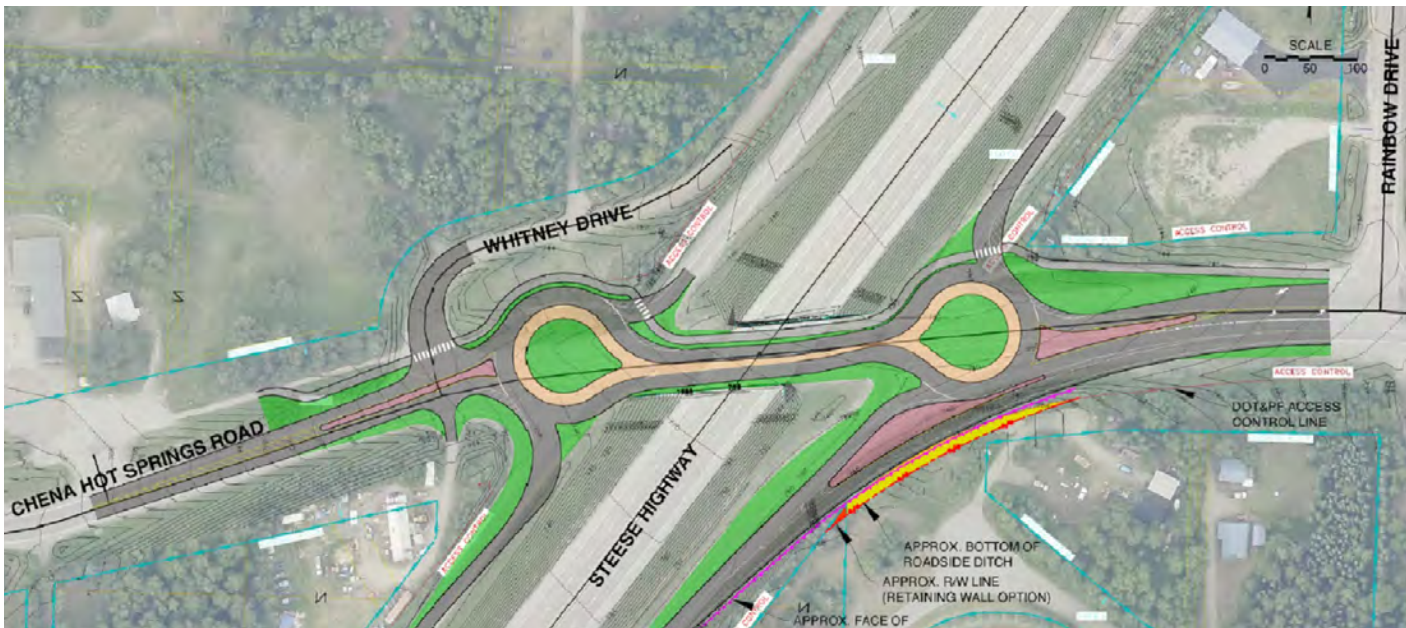
We will now proceed with the next step in the transfer process, which is to offer

first right of refusal to adjoining property owners to purchase the property at fair market value, based on an appraisal. We will move forward with this step over the next few weeks. If adjoining property owners refuse to purchase the property, the spring will then be put up for an open market sale.

We appreciate the community's patience as we work to keep the facility open through the transfer process. We will continue to keep you updated on the status of Fox spring.



# Steese Highway/CHSR Roundabouts project



Conceptual illustration of the Steese Highway/Chena Hot Springs Road Roundabouts with Bypass Lane project

A project that recently has gathered high public interest is one to improve safety at the intersection of Chena Hot Springs Road and the Steese Highway. This project, currently in the design phase, involves constructing two single-lane roundabouts and a bypass lane on Chena Hot Springs Road where it intersects the highway.

In 2013, this project was nominated as a Highway Safety Improvement Program project based on a crash rate of 1.02 crashes/million miles for the southbound leg of the interchange. This rate is twice the statewide average of 0.47 crashes/million miles for similar intersections. The crash data is from two collection sets, 2005-2009 and 2008-2012. The earlier data set showed 14 crashes, of which two were minor injuries. The second data set showed 19 crashes, of which three were minor injuries and one was a major injury.

Currently, there are additional issues with the intersection. These include obstructed sight distance, high speeds, curves and the close proximity of bridge walls. Because of these factors, improving safety was the driving force for this project. One of our goals is to proactively prevent crashes at that location from getting worse.

Project staff held an initial meeting in July 2014, at which they collected suggestions from residents and heard

input about the intersection options. Public input from the meeting was incorporated into the project in the form of a bypass lane for those turning onto Chena Hot Springs Road from the northbound Steese Highway. This bypass lane will allow those drivers to avoid going through the roundabout. This feature will include a retaining wall along the southeast side of the road, which will minimize right-of-way impacts.

We looked at other options and ideas to improve the intersection, but found issues that make them impractical for this location. For each, we considered safety, capacity, and capital and operating costs. Installing traffic signals was a popular idea, but based on the height and grade of the highway bridge, traffic signals would present sight distance and stopping difficulties and would not improve intersection safety. A light would cause longer delays for drivers, result in poorer area air quality and cost more to maintain than roundabouts. An option that involved lengthening the bridge to improve sight distance proved prohibitive due to high capital costs.

An option that improved safety without presenting capacity or cost issues was to build two single-lane roundabouts on Chena Hot Springs Road at the bottom of the Steese Highway ramps. Roundabouts reduce crash frequency and severity. In

North Pole, crash rates have decreased 68 percent since the roundabouts were installed at the ramp terminals of Badger Road/Richardson Highway and the intersection with Santa Claus Lane/St. Nicholas Drive/Park Way. Roundabouts would help with the problem of high speeds at the CHSR/ Steese intersection by slowing drivers down through the approach angles as they enter the roundabouts. They also would reduce traffic conflicts for those turning left from Chena Hot Springs Road onto the highway.

Roundabouts present other benefits, too. They reduce delay in comparison to traffic signals and other intersection control. They reduce fuel consumption and improve air quality by not having drivers stop at a light. They also save money on maintenance costs versus a traffic signal.

Last month, staff presented the current roundabout concept during a well attended public meeting at Weller Elementary School. People may submit comments on the project through March 1.

The project is currently expected to go to construction in 2017 or 2018.

## More information

To learn more about the project, visit <http://dot.alaska.gov/nreg/steese-chsr/>

## Save the date

**What:** Super Open House 2016

**When:** 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Saturday, April 16

**Where:** Hutchison High School, 3750 Geist Rd., Fairbanks

We're gearing up for this year's construction Super Open House! This event will feature dozens of projects throughout the region, including the College Road Right Turn Lanes, Goldhill Road Bike and Pedestrian Improvements, and Badger Road Bike and Pedestrian Path Resurfacing projects in Fairbanks and North Pole, and projects along the Dalton and Parks highways. Staff from our Northern Region offices will be available to provide information and answer your questions.

For more info, contact Betsy Hess at [betsy.hess@alaska.gov](mailto:betsy.hess@alaska.gov).

## Safety Corner

**DID YOU KNOW:** Slips, trips and falls make up the majority of general industry accidents, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

Slips, trips and falls can result in pain, lost wages, disability and even death. Fortunately, such accidents are often avoidable.

One easy measure you can take to avoid slips and falls is to wear proper footwear with good traction. This is particularly important during the winter when sidewalks and parking lots are icy.

Other tips to help you prevent slips, trips and falls include:

- Be aware of your surroundings and pay attention when moving around;
- Wear ice grippers during icy winter weather;
- Take extra precautions when mounting and dismounting vehicles and climbing ladders;
- Keep walkways free of obstacles, such as cables;
- Keep workplaces clean and floors dry and clear; and
- Don't rush.

## Employee Recognition Awards

In December, we presented our annual Northern Region Employee Recognition Awards. These awards recognize employees for their accomplishments and contributions that advance the department's mission and objectives.

Northern Region Maintenance and Operations (M&O) Engineer Jason Sakalaskas was selected as Northern Region Employee of the Year. Jason was recognized for his creation of a maintenance budgeting tool that helps regions compare resources.

Steve McGroarty was selected as the region's Outstanding Employee for 2015. Steve provided critical assessment and design guidance during the 2015 Dalton Highway flooding incident. He also provided much needed support on several construction projects, including the Chena Small Tracts Improvements and the Dalton Highway MP 0-9 Reconstruction.

Michelle Dwyer was recognized for her leadership



Pictured, from left, are Northern Region Director Dave Miller, Northern Region Employee of the Year winner Jason Sakalaskas and M&O Chief Steve Potter.

during the department's transition to a new financial, procurement and human resources system. Michelle coordinated the region's transition, helping her co-workers and coordinating information.

This year's Team Achievement Award was given to

four Construction and M&O employees: Sean Berg, Carolyn Deskins, Hank Parra and Tom Williams. Sean, Carolyn and Hank teamed up to provide materials testing for construction projects at one remote lab, which saved time and money. They were supported in these efforts by Tom.

Here's the full list of this year's Northern Region winners and honorable mentions:

**Employee of the Year:** Jason Sakalaskas

**Outstanding Employee:** Steve McGroarty

**Leadership Award:** Michelle Dwyer

**Team Achievement Award:** Team Super Lab (Sean Berg, Carolyn Deskins, Hank Parra and Tom Williams)

Honorable mentions:

**Outstanding Employee category:** Brandy Milles, Jeff Peterson, Shelley Potter, Maggie Slife

**Team Achievement category:** Northern Region Right of Way section