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STATE NEWS

State Rail Plan in the works for Alaska

By KATIE EMMETS

With the creation of a statewide rail plan, Alaska could see federal funding for future improvements and expansions of its railroads.

"If there is any hope for federal funding, we have to address the issue of a state rail plan," said Bob Laurie, Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities rail coordinator and transportation planner.

The 2008 Passenger Rail Investments and Improvements Act mandated that each state create a plan detailing the state's railroad history, current rail operations, and future plans. Laurie said the department is shooting for a December 2013 completion date for the plan, which will be incorporated into the Alaska Federal Lands Long Range Transportation Improvement Plan.

Laurie said the Federal Railroad Association has given the ADOTPF very specific criteria it must include in the plan such as an inventory of overall rail transportation services and facilities; an analysis of rails transportation, economic and environmental impacts; and a performance evaluation of passenger rail services operating in the state, including possible improvements and a description of strategies to achieve the improvements.

The plans will look about 20 years into the future and are required to be updated every five years.

After its completion, the plan will be submitted to the Federal Railroad Administration for final approval and then implemented into a nation-wide transportation plan.

Since the mandate of the plan in 2008, most Lower 48 states have completed one rail plan and are already on their second, Laurie said, but Alaska is just getting around to creating its first as it now has the time and the funding to do so.

Alaska has two working railroads: the Alaska Railroad from Seward to Fairbanks, and the White Pass and Yukon Route railway out of Skagway.

Laurie said the ADOTFP wrote a statewide rail plan when it purchased the Alaska Railroad from the United States federal government in 1985, but has not updated since 1990.

The Alaska Railroad is one of about six trains in the country that is owned by a state.

For the last 20 years, Laurie said, Lower 48 states have been looking for rail abatements because their railroads aren't making money and some are even running deficits.

"That is what makes Alaska unique," he said, "We're not looking at abatements. We're looking at extensions."

Because the railroad has expanded and helped to form so many Alaska communities like Skagway, Alaska DOTPF is constantly looking for ways to enhance and expand its railways.

"Sixty-five percent of state population is along the rail belt," he said. "The railroad was key to the development of that part of Alaska."

Laurie said further development in the state could be possible if railroads are extended in the future.

Federal rail grants are made available to both state and privately owned railroads, which means both the Alaska Railroad and White Pass could receive funding from the government.

As its business model stands now, however, White Pass is a tourist excursion train and doesn't meet the requirements for any federal grants, because it is neither a commuter railroad nor a freight railroad, Laurie explained.

Alaska Railroad offers full passenger, commuter, excursion and freight services and will

qualify for federal grants.

Freight carrying, Laurie said, is the meat and potatoes of most rail operations.

As of now, the owner of the WP&YR, ClubLink Enterprises, is not interested in an ore haul for White Pass, but Laurie said he thinks there is always a possibility of that changing.

Former White Pass president Eugene Hretzay was part of the state rail plan steering committee, and Laurie said he would be asking new White Pass President John Finlayson to join.

The State of Alaska hired HDR Alaska, Inc. to consult on the planning. Laurie says HDR has helped with railroad plans in San Francisco and Portland, Ore.

Laurie, other DOTPF members and HDR consultants kicked off the public meeting tour in Skagway and will continue in the communities of Haines, Wasilla, Seward, Anchorage, Fairbanks and Nome — all communities that either have rail or are interested in it.

Haines is included, Laurie said, because there has been talk about the creation of a railroad in Haines for decades.

Alaska DOTPF put statewide rail plan information on its website in March, and Laurie said the department has received a lot of good feedback from Alaska residents already.

After this round of meetings, all public meetings will be held online.

Laurie said proposed plans will be updated to the website and someone from DOT will give a presentation, which will also be uploaded for viewing. Alaskans will then have 30 days to look over the information and respond with comments or suggestions.

Laurie said he expects there will be two more informational meetings: one later in the summer and one in the fall.

Those interested can get more information or submit comments at www.dot.alaska.gov/railplan.