

# State DOT draws up new statewide railroad plan

By Diana Haecker

What is your vision for a railroad system in Alaska over the next 20 years? This was the question that Bob Laurie with the Dept. of Transportation and Public Facilities asked the thin crowd of three who attended a public meeting on the Alaska State Rail Plan last week. Such plans, Laurie said, generally look 20 years into the future and are updated every five years. To update the existing one, a host of government employees came to find out what Nomeites envision when it comes to rail.

Laurie, Murray Walsh, the Roads to Resources manager of the DNR office, Bruce Carr with the Alaska Railroad Corporation, a public relations specialist with HDR Consultants and two additional DOT employees hosted a meeting to learn the public's ideas on a statewide railroad plan.

Only three Nomeites found their way to the open house event, held Thursday, June 6 at Old St. Joe's Hall. Two older children wandered into the event, leaving valuable feedback on a post-it note, pointing out the benefit of freight brought in by rail rather barge.

Laurie with the DOT held a power point presentation. He explained that a statewide rail plan is mandated by federal law if Alaska wants to apply for federal rail funding and investment. The plan is supposed to include an inventory of the existing rail system, an assessment of safety, freight rail and passenger rail needs, transportation economics, a long-range service and capital investment program and a long-term vision for the future of rail in Alaska.

Currently, there are two main railroads in Alaska. The Alaska Railroad Corporation operates the Alaska Railroad between Fairbanks and Seward. The White Pass & Yukon Route operates a railroad between Whitehorse and Skagway.

Last year, the Alaska Railroad hauled 415,000 passengers and 6 million tons of freight. None of that, of course, to Nome.

Considering long-term vision, thoughts were voiced about connecting a potential Arctic port in Nome or Teller to the existing rail system.

Bruce Carr pointed out that freight – not passenger service – pays for the operation and maintenance costs of a rail system. To be cost effective, rail works well when high volumes of freight are moved over long distances and long periods of time. Carr pointed out that the Ambler mining district with its large low-quality ore of copper, zinc and other low-value minerals would be a prime candidate for rail, because it would move large quantities of ore over long distances to market.

Laurie pointed out that railroad construction is expensive and that Alaska's geography places constraints on building railroads, because there can only be a two-foot rise over a length of 100 feet. This necessitates long routes and that doesn't play favorably into the economics of a rural rail construction project. Murray Walsh, DOT manager for the Roads to Resources program said it costs \$10 million to build one mile of rail. A rail from Fairbanks to Nome would cost approximately \$5 billion at current prices. To make this a reality, the experts said, a great deal of mineral resources would have to be discovered and mined to make it worthwhile to build a railroad.

Clearly, the romance of rail and the pioneering spirit of busting a railroad through unopened country still has some allure and was cited quite

often during the event. Bruce Carr said railroads have traditionally helped open up undeveloped parts of the nation and Alaska. Provided there could be a large freight user to foot the bill of \$50,000 per mile to maintain a 500-mile Nome-Fairbanks rail, passengers could travel in train cars in style, see the grand landscape go by or watch movies on drop-down screens. Never mind that the trip between Nome and Fairbanks would take about 10 hours. Walsh said that offshore oil development could really open up the future of rail to the northwest coast of Alaska. "A 100-car train could move 2.6 million gallons of oil," added ARRC's Bruce Carr.

Nomeites thought more practically. There would be a whole lot more cars coming into Nome, if Nome were connected via rail to the rest of the state, commented Jim Hansen.

The DOT also held railroad plan meetings in Anchorage, Wasilla, Haines, Skagway, Seward and Fairbanks. The DOT plans to hold two online open house events before drafting the 2013 statewide rail plan to be released in the fall. A final draft plan will be submitted to the Federal Railroad Administration in December 2013. For more information or to comment on the rail plan, go to [www.dot.alaska.gov/railroad](http://www.dot.alaska.gov/railroad).



Photo by Diana Haecker

**RAIL TO THE COAST**— Nomeite Jim Hansen, left, and Alaska Railroad Corporation's Bruce Carr discuss the most reasonable route to bring rail to northwestern Alaska, during last week's meeting on updating a statewide rail plan for Alaska.

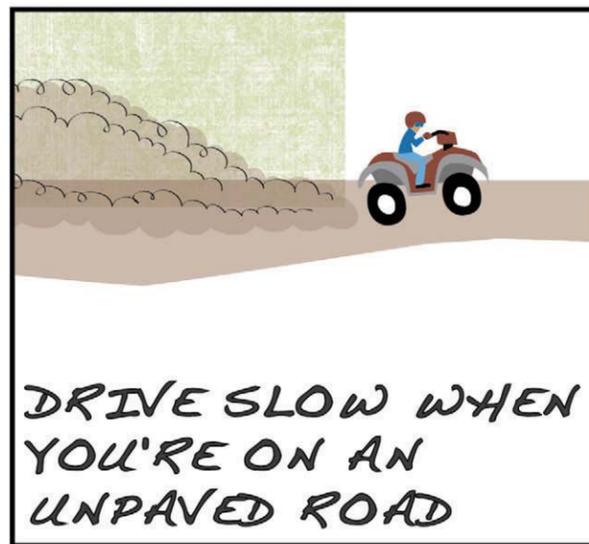
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Photo by Diana Haecker  
**DABBLING DUCKS**— A pair of Northern Shovelers forage in a pond outside of Nome.