

Frequently Asked Questions

State / Federal Project No.: CFHWY00130 / OA33026
FAQ Last Updated October 10, 2024



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1. GENERAL QUESTIONS

Q: What is the purpose of this project? A: The Sterling Safety Corridor Improvements Milepost (MP) 82.5 to 94 project is a federally funded project to reconstruct the Sterling Highway between Sterling and Soldotna to improve safety and reduce congestion. The goals of this project are to:

- Provide a safe and reliable roadway that supports the efficient movement of goods, services, and people
- Allow for decommissioning of the Traffic Safety Corridor by constructing a safer roadway that is less reliant on institutional and enforcement measures to abate crashes
- Better accommodate the seasonal increase of tourist and recreational traffic
- Minimize inconvenience to motorists and impacts to private property access

Q: Why is this project needed? A: Due to elevated crash rates, this section of the Sterling Highway was designated as a 'Traffic Safety Corridor' in 2009, which enacted educational and enforcement controls and mobilized resources aimed at improving safety (including a double-fine zone) until more permanent engineering measures could be implemented. Since being designated a safety corridor, some safety metrics have improved, but fatal and major injury crash rates remain well above national averages with nearly half of these resulting from head-on collisions.

In addition, traffic volumes have increased over 400% since the 1970s. Traffic volumes already exceed the current two-lane roadway's capacity during much of the summer season, and traffic volumes are expected to increase another 30% over the next 30 years. Summer average daily traffic volumes are more than double winter average daily traffic volumes. During the summer season the road is congested and passing and turning movements are difficult which leads to elevated crashes from driver frustration. During the winter months, traffic flows more freely, but lack of street lighting, wildlife on the road, and slippery conditions lead to much higher rates of fatal and major injury crashes and animal-vehicle collisions compared to the summer months.

This project is necessary to address both the safety and capacity deficiencies of the current highway configuration.

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Q: What is a ‘Progressive Design-Build’ project? What are the benefits? A: Unlike the traditional step-by-step ‘design-bid-build’ project delivery model where the design is completed, the project is advertised for contractor bids, and then the low bidder is awarded the construction, in a ‘Progressive Design-Build’ (PDB) model the contractor and design consultant work together to advance design and construction tasks as a joint team. PDB is also known as “collaborative delivery” and “value-based contractor selection”. By integrating the contractor into the preconstruction efforts, the PDB approach is expected to:

- Encourage collaboration to improve project efficiency
- Foster engineer/contractor innovation
- Lower risk of budget overrun
- Increase flexibility of the construction schedule and construction phasing
- Maintain continuity of project knowledge through construction

Q: What happened to the previous project/design? Will this project consider comments and concerns shared during that project? A: Comments and input provided by the public and stakeholders in response to the original study in 2015 are documented and will be considered during the current project.

Q: What is the project area? A: The project area begins in Sterling at Sterling Highway Milepost (MP) 82.5 just east of the Weigh Station and continues to Soldotna at MP 94 near the Devin Drive intersection at Fred Meyer’s.



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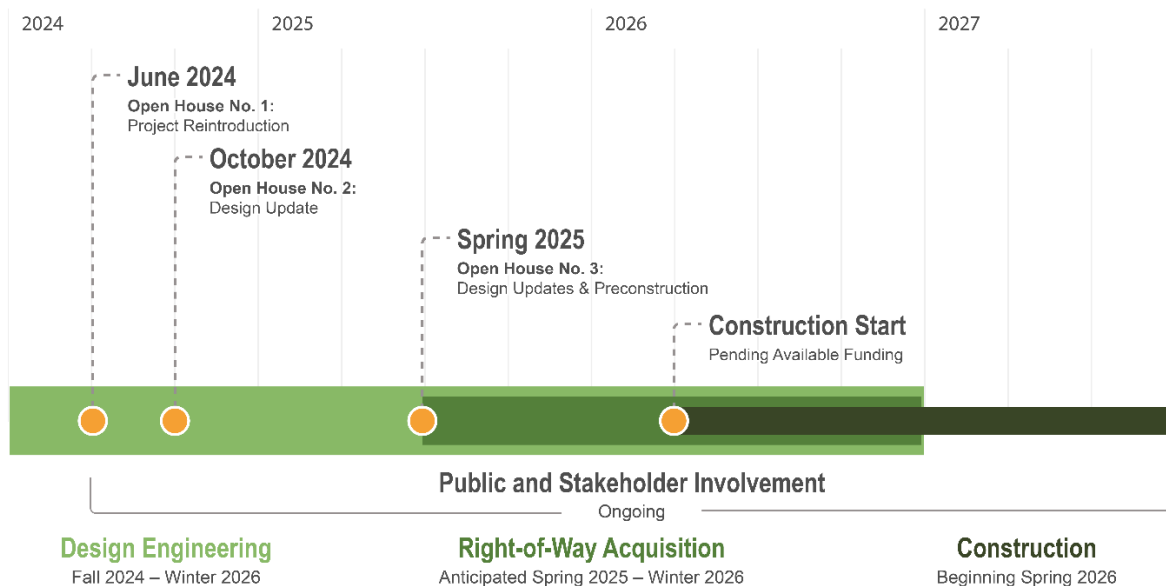
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2. PROJECT SCHEDULE AND FUNDING

Q: What is the overall project schedule? A: The project is currently in the design phase, which is expected to continue through the winter of 2026. During this phase, the project team will gather input from the public, and collect and analyze updated engineering data including survey, traffic and safety, geotechnical, hydrology and hydraulics, and utilities. The project team will develop and evaluate design alternatives, bringing these to the public and stakeholders at public open house meetings for input and feedback. The project team will also begin permitting and preparation for clearing and utility relocations to allow construction activities to begin in 2026, or as soon as funding allows.

Construction funding is identified in the Statewide Transportation Improvement Plan (STIP) for fiscal year FY26, which starts October 2025 (<https://dot.alaska.gov/stwdplng/cip/stip/>). While some activities such as clearing and utility relocations may begin in late 2025, substantial construction activities will likely not commence until the spring of 2026.



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3. DESIGN QUESTIONS

Q: How do I see the actual plans? What design alternative is being considered? A: The Final Environmental Assessment for the project was completed in 2021 and considered several design alternatives including a 'do nothing' option. That report concluded that a divided 4-lane highway with median breaks best met the project goals and was therefore identified as the 'preferred alternative.' That report and other project materials are available on the project website, at: www.SterlingSafetyImprovements.com

However, for the current progressive design-build project, DOT&PF has tasked a new project team with re-assessing the previous work and recommendations (including the previous preferred alternative) to balance the project's overall safety benefits with the need to minimize impacts to private property access. Therefore, plans are not currently available, and the design team is working through an updated traffic and safety analysis, while continuing to solicit comments and feedback from the public. We plan to present design concepts (as recommendations) to the public in the spring of 2025, at which point additional public comments will be welcomed.

Q: Is this project anticipating leaving any 2-lane segments in the corridor? A: The 2-lane alternative was considered the 'no build' alternative in the previous environmental assessment and was determined to not meet the purpose and need of this project, therefore it is not being considered.

Q: Many people I've talked to don't want a separated highway with a median. Why not just build a 5-lane section with a center turn lane like the Kenai Spur Highway? A: At and following the June 2024 Open Houses, the project team heard from many people. While some preferred the safety benefits of a 4-lane divided highway design, most preferred the accessibility offered by a 5-lane design. The project team is working to identify solutions which address public comments and concerns while balancing the project's goals of improving safety and reducing the number of serious and fatal injury crashes in the corridor. Some design alternatives being considered are:

- Exploring different alternatives for different portions of the corridor
- Reassessing opportunities for frontage roads and expanding side-street networks
- Reevaluating side-street realignments and locations for median breaks where a divided highway is considered

As part of its assessment of design alternatives, the project team is evaluating available data from the Kenai Spur Highway and considering whether a similar configuration could meet the project objectives for the Sterling Highway Safety Corridor. Though there are some similarities, as shown in the table below, there are also noteworthy differences. One significant difference between the two highways is the number of crashes resulting in fatalities. During the 10-year study period, there were nine traffic-related fatalities on the Sterling Highway Safety Corridor, compared to one fatality on the Kenai Spur Highway. Eight of the fatalities on the Sterling Highway Safety Corridor were a result of head-on collisions. There were no head-on collision fatalities on the Kenai Spur Highway.

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| Sterling Highway (MP 82.5-94) | Kenai Spur Highway (MP 5-8) |
|--|--|
| Average Daily Traffic: 6,000 to 15,000 vehicles/day | Average Daily Traffic: 9,000 to 11,000 vehicles/day |
| Peak Seasonal Traffic: 13,000 to 19,000 vehicles/day | Peak Seasonal Traffic: 11,000 to 13,000 vehicles/day |
| Percent Trucks: 7.7% | Percent Trucks: 4.7% |
| Number of Driveways per mile: ~16 | Number of Driveways per mile: ~20 |
| Speed Limit: 55 MPH | Speed Limit: 55 MPH |
| Percentage of Crashes that are Animal-Vehicle Crashes: 25% | Percentage of Crashes that are Animal-Vehicle Crashes: 50% |
| Number of Fatalities (10-year Study Period): 9 | Number of Fatalities (10-year Study Period): 1 |
| Fatalities due to Head-On Collisions (10-year Study Period): 8 | Fatalities due to Head-On Collisions (10-year Study Period): 0 |

Q: What are the potential benefits of a separated highway design with medians, and what are the downsides? A: Medians physically separate opposing lanes of traffic on a roadway and can be depressed, flush, or raised. They are constructed from a range of materials, such as grass or other landscaping, concrete and steel barriers, or painted lines.

The primary benefit of medians is improved safety, specifically:

- Preventing head-on collisions between vehicles traveling in opposite directions
- Reducing the risk of severe crashes resulting in serious injury or fatalities
- Providing space for emergency vehicles or vehicles in distress to pull safely off the roadway

Medians can also reduce long-term maintenance costs by improving snow removal operations, reducing the number of lane miles that must be plowed and maintained, and improving water quality of run-off as part of a stormwater management system.



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While medians provide significant safety and maintenance benefits, there are some downsides to consider, including:

- Restricted left-turn access at some driveways and side streets, potentially requiring a right turn or U-turn to access the property or business.
- Higher reliance on side streets and frontage roads to maintain access.
- Potentially higher construction cost due to earthwork associated with divided embankment and median and the need for construction of frontage roads and side streets to maintain access.
- Potentially larger overall footprint (i.e. width of the highway) if median width exceeds comparable center turn lane and frontage roads are constructed. This can create additional impacts to the environment, utilities, and right-of-way acquisition needs.

Q: With a 4-lane roadway with a median, what intersections are being considered to have left turn access (i.e. a ‘median break’)? A: The previous preferred alternative design included left turn lanes at approximately half-mile increments. The project team is reevaluating this design, therefore does not currently have a list of proposed median break locations. We are aware access concerns are a high priority issue for private property owners along the highway.

For roadways and driveways without direct left turn access, alternative solutions are being considered including protected U-turn lanes with sufficient length and width to accommodate longer vehicles and trailers, as well as frontage and side roads for alternative access to the highway.

Q: Aren't U-turns (if required in alternative intersection style) less safe than making left-hand turns from a center turn lane? How will large vehicles such as semi-trucks, RV's, or vehicles pulling trailers be able to safely make a U-turn? A: Left-hand turns and U-turns from a center turn lane both create potential safety issues for vehicles travelling in opposing directions competing for the same space. Left hand turns entering the highway from a side-street or driveway require the turning vehicle to cross both directions of traffic, requiring a gap in traffic from both directions. Alternative intersection styles that reduce risks associated with left turns are under consideration. These alternative designs use increased median widths, traffic patterns that only require crossing one direction of travel at a time, and dedicated turn lanes that protect turning vehicles from traffic. The result is easier and safer turning movements. The intersection designs under consideration have been shown to substantially increase safety, decrease delays, and can accommodate any size vehicle.

Q: Will there be new stop lights? If so – where? A: The project team is updating the traffic and safety analysis for the project, which will include investigating if conditions meet federal standards for installing new traffic signals at major intersections, such as: Mackey Lake Road, Forest Lane, and Swanson River Road. This evaluation is guided by the Federal Highway Administration's *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices* (MUTCD), available online here: <https://mutcd.fhwa.dot.gov/index.htm>.

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4. IMPACTS TO BUSINESSES, NEIGHBORING PROPERTIES, AND RESIDENTS

Q: What are the right-of-way needs for this project? How far into my property will the project encroach?

A: The State of Alaska DOT&PF has been considering widening the Sterling Highway to four lanes since the mid-1980's and has already purchased much of the right-of-way (ROW) anticipated to be needed for the project. The existing ROW width throughout the project corridor varies from 180 feet to over 200 feet, enough to accommodate highway expansion in nearly all locations. The project team anticipates most properties adjacent to the project will not be further impacted.

Additional ROW easements and/or acquisition may be required at some locations to accommodate intersection and access improvements, such as realignment of intersecting roads, new frontage roads, new side streets, and reconnecting driveways, but these needs (if any) are not identified at this point.

We expect to have a better idea of ROW needs in spring 2025, at which point the DOT&PF ROW team will reach out to property owners potentially impacted. DOT&PF will follow all federal and state regulations and statutes for any ROW identified for acquisition. Additional information can be found on the DOT&PF Real Estate/Right-of-Way page at <https://dot.alaska.gov/stwddes/dcsrow/>.

Q: During construction, how will emergency vehicles and residents travel to and from Sterling and Soldotna? A: Prior to construction activities beginning, a traffic control plan will be developed and approved by the DOT&PF, in coordination with Kenai Peninsula Borough, the City of Soldotna, first responders, and other user groups. The State of Alaska requires access be maintained for business and residents during construction.

Q: What work is planned to repair or upgrade the Soldotna Creek culvert under the highway at Mackey Lake Road? A: The culvert at Soldotna Creek is being evaluated for replacement, and the project team is considering different design options, including a single-span bridge, a precast concrete arch bridge, and a new (larger) culvert. These options are being evaluated, comparing costs, environmental impacts, and potential benefits. This culvert replacement work would be completed during the construction of this project.

Q: Will this project result in any changes to the speed limit? Why not just reduce the speed limit to improve safety? A: The project team is evaluating the design speed for potential changes to the roadway. Speed limits are determined through speed studies that consider average speeds, crash numbers, roadway environments, and State regulations. Speed limit changes have been shown by national studies to have little effect on how fast people actually drive without additional enforcement and educational programs. Alaska has experience in corridors where lowering speed limits has resulted in greater differences in speed between vehicles, leading to increased safety risks. Therefore, any speed limit change must be carefully considered to ensure the desired outcome. For additional information, please visit the DOT&PF website at this link: <https://dot.alaska.gov/traveltopics/how-are-speed-limits-set.shtml>.

Q: How will this project address the underlying causes of crashes, such as wildlife or driver behavior?

A: Addressing some of the underlying causes of crashes such as driver fatigue and dangerous or reckless

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behavior such as speeding or texting while driving requires increased enforcement and educational programs. However, the physical improvements to the highway are aimed at and expected to improve safety. Some design safety features being considered include adding lanes for additional capacity and passing opportunities, separating traffic traveling in opposite directions with medians, intersection configuration alignment and improvements, lighting, wildlife under-crossings, and a separated pedestrian pathway.

Q: There are currently areas on each side of the highway that are accessible for off road vehicles (ATV's, side-by-sides, snowmachines, etc.). Will this project eliminate access to those, or is there a plan to accommodate them in the new design? A: The project team understands the ability to travel the corridor by ATV is desirable for many users. We are investigating ways to accommodate that use without creating conflicts with other users (vehicles, pedestrians) or elements of the project (e.g. utilities).

Q: We love the idea of the separated pedestrian walkway on the north side of the highway, but how will we 'south siders' be able to cross the highway to access it safely? Will there be an underpass, bridge, etc? A: The project team is considering pedestrian safety continuously throughout the design process for all users, including the ability to cross the highway safely.

Q: Will there be sound barriers considered for this project? A: The project team is currently conducting a Noise Study and Analysis. Sound barriers or other noise reduction methods will be implemented if deemed feasible and reasonable in accordance with the Alaska Noise Policy. To view the policy and other information on noise, visit <https://dot.alaska.gov/stwddes/desenviron/resources/noise.shtml>.

5. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

Q: How can I make suggestions or give feedback about the project? A: The team will accept comments and be available to answer questions throughout the project. However, the earlier feedback is received, the easier it is to incorporate into project design considerations. Comments can be emailed to the project team at SterlingSafetyImprovements@dowl.com.

In addition, the project team will host three public Open House meetings:

- Public Open House No. 1 occurred on June 25, 2024, at the Sterling Community Center and June 26, 2024, at the Soldotna Public Library.
- Public Open House No. 2 will be held on October 24, 2024, at the Soldotna Regional Sports Complex.
- Public Open House No. 3 (anticipated in the Spring 2025).

Public open house meetings are advertised on the State of Alaska Online Public Notice site, the project website, by postcard, email notices, in the Peninsula Clarion, and radio stations KDLL and KRSM.

Visit the project website, www.SterlingSafetyImprovements.com for more information, to join the mailing list, and to make comments.

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Q: How will public comments be taken into consideration, and will they impact the actual design? A:

Throughout the design phase, the project team will work to identify solutions which address public comments and concerns while balancing the project's goals of improving safety and reducing the number of serious and fatal injury crashes in the corridor. We will continue to gather input from the public and stakeholders throughout the design process.

In response to feedback and concerns already received about the project, our team is:

- Exploring different typical sections for different portions of the corridor
- Reassessing opportunities for frontage roads and expanding side-street networks
- Reevaluating side-street realignments and locations for median breaks where a divided highway is considered

Q: When will actual design plans be available for the public to see? At that point, will the decision already have been made? A:

The project team anticipates presenting a design concept during the third public meeting (anticipated in spring 2025) for the public review and comment. At that point, final design decisions will not have been made, and the public will have this opportunity to provide specific comments and feedback on the team's recommendations.