

Date: 2/12/07

Time: 5:30pm – 7:30pm

Location: Healy Community Center, Healy, AK

Subject: Public Meeting, Parks Hwy Scenic Byway

Present:

State Officials:

Bill Kiger, Alaska State Parks

Penny Bauder, Alaska State Parks

Aneta Synan, Alaska Department of Transportation, Scenic Byways Coordinator

Matt Green, Alaska State Parks

Annette Iverson, Alaska State Parks

Stakeholders:

David M. Talerico

Neal Laugman

Elwood Lynn

Armeda Bulard

Jenna Hamm

Cass Ray

Baxter Mercer

Steve Jones

Ree Nancarrow

Teresa Hall

Rachel Carlson

Gordon Carlson

Arnel Hernandez

Joe Bovee

Ingrid Nixon

Julia Potter

Joanna Cockman

Dominic Canale

Ruth Colianni

Patsy Nordmark

Jerri Roberts

Miriam Valentine

Sherry Buron

Chuck Saylor

Judy Starkey-Saylor

Joe Richardson

Ezekiel Baye

Scott Reisland

Amy Reisland-Speer

Paul Anderson

David Tomeo

Melissa Snipes

The meeting was called to order by Penny Bauder at approximately 5:40pm.

Penny welcomed the stakeholders and introduced herself as an employee of Alaska State Parks. Annette Iverson, Matt Green, and Bill Kiger also introduced themselves as Alaska State Parks employees, and Bill Kiger explained that State Parks has been contracted by DOT to write the Corridor Partnership Plan. Aneta Synan introduced herself as the Scenic Byways Coordinator for the Alaska Department of Transportation.

Penny outlined the purpose of the meeting: a grant has been received by DOT and the Fairbanks Convention and Visitor's Bureau, allowing a Corridor Partnership Plan to be written for a section of the Parks Highway, from the Chulitna River bridge to Healy. An

additional purpose is to form a grassroots task force to guide the content of the Partnership Plan. Penny briefly described some of the benefits of a Corridor Partnership Plan: recognition of businesses and communities, and funding for community projects.

Penny reviewed the agenda for the meeting, and offered to provide a copy for any stakeholders who had not received one.

Penny emphasized that the audience should feel free to contribute comments or questions during the presentations.

Penny introduced the concept of recording "open issues," topics raised during the meeting that there would not be time to address during the meeting itself. Keeping track of the topics will ensure that they are addressed when time allows.

Penny asked the stakeholders to fill out a survey that they received when entering the meeting, and leave it with her at the end of the meeting.

Penny introduced herself and described her connection to the Parks Highway – she lives in Anchorage, but has been contracted by DOT to write the Corridor Partnership Plan; additionally, she drives the Parks Highway as often as she can, due to the many opportunities along the highway. She then asked the stakeholders to introduce themselves, and describe their connection to the Highway.

The stakeholders introduced themselves, and described their connections to the Highway.

Penny thanked the stakeholders for coming and stated that they have the knowledge, experience, and vision to make the project successful.

Penny introduced Aneta Synan, the state Scenic Byways Coordinator, who will be giving a presentation on the Scenic Byways program.

Aneta stated that she has driven the Highway previously, and greatly enjoyed the views of Denali on the drive to Healy. Aneta briefly described her professional background and how she had come to be the Scenic Byways Coordinator. The purpose of her presentation is to describe the program, and DOT's role in the process. DOT's role is limited in how the program is carried out at the community level. The program was created in 1993; since then, 13 segments of highway have been designated as state Scenic Byways. 3 of these Byways have since then been nationally recognized, 2 of them as All-American Roads, of which there are only 25 in the United States.

The state Scenic Byways program is multi-modal, and includes the Alaska Railroad and the Alaska Marine Highway.

Aneta emphasized that the state and national Byways programs are about recognition, not regulation. The state program includes a provision that explicitly protects the rights of property owners along state Scenic Byways. A handout available to the stakeholders at

the meeting entrance outlines the state Scenic Byway program. The program is intended to encourage economic development in rural communities.

One of the first hurdles a State Scenic Byway needs to overcome is developing a Corridor Partnership Plan; it opens the door for grant funding. Alaska has three designated Byways that have completed a Corridor Partnership Plan: the Seward Highway All American Road, the Alaska Marine Highway, and the Glen Highway National Scenic Byway. Copies of those plans are available on the State Scenic Byways website.

The purpose of a corridor plan is to analyze and describe the outstanding features of the highway, and to develop strategies for interpreting and promoting those qualities. The plans are not developed or approved by DOT, and they are not enforced by DOT or any other state or municipal organization. The plans are written by the stakeholders and residents along the scenic Byway. DOT provides funding for the plan, but the stakeholders decide what goes into it.

The Parks Highway Scenic Byway plan does not have to resemble the plans for other scenic Byways in the state; each plan is different because the desires and goals of the communities along each highway are different.

Aneta restated that a Corridor Partnership Plan opens the door to grant funding. She stated that she manages the grant program, and that when a grant application is received for a particular Scenic Byway, she must verify that it is listed in the Corridor Partnership Plan for that Byway. It is important that the plan for the Parks Highway Scenic Byway includes all the projects that the stakeholders would like to accomplish along the highway; otherwise, the projects will not be eligible for grants through the Scenic Byways program.

Once the plan is completed, there are several categories of projects that are eligible for grant funding:

- Safety Improvements
- Byway Facilities
- Recreational Access
- Resource Protection
- Interpretive Materials
- Marketing

Examples of projects that have been funded include a grant awarded to the Seward Highway, which included a restroom, bus shelter, and interpretive sign at a park in Downtown Seward. Another example is interpretive signage and a landscaped rest area in Moose Pass. Another example is restoration of mining buildings in the community of Hope; Hope is about 18 miles from the Seward Highway, but was still eligible for grant funding. The same grant paid for interpretive panels at the Hope museum complex. Historic buildings were restored in Cooper Landing, providing a museum that is used as a Byway interpretive center. Grant funds were used to restore the Point Retreat Lighthouse

in Southeast Alaska, which was eligible due to proximity to the Alaska Marine Highway. The Glen Highway has an active Byway organization that produced an interpretive plan using grant funds, to outline the interpretive projects along the Glen. The Glen Highway organization also produced a brochure that outlines visitor amenities along the highway, as well as a placemat that is distributed through local restaurants for visitors to read. The Seward Highway has produced a number of visitor publications using grants, including a CD-ROM media kit.

Byways are not required to have an organization to carry out the objectives of the Byway plan, but some state Byways have formed different types of organizations to suit their needs.

The state Scenic Byway program has an informational brochure and a quarterly email newsletter; anyone who wishes to receive the newsletter should contact Aneta or Penny.

Each state Scenic Byway receives a panel on the back of the official state highway map. This is used to provide visitors with information about the Byway. The maps are distributed free to travelers at visitor centers in Alaska, and provided to the Alaska travel industry for distribution to visitors.

The "Milepost" publication also contains information on the Scenic Byways. Aneta also maintains a website at www.Byways.alaska.gov, with information for travelers and general information on the program.

The state has installed signs along scenic Byways; this was a priority for Aneta when she began her duties with the program.

Aneta provided her contact information, and asked for questions from the audience. Questions included:

Q: How long did it take the organizations for the Seward and Marine Highways to develop the criteria for their grants?

Aneta: The Marine Highway system started their plan in 1999 or 2000, and it was finished in 2002. The Seward Highway was originally a Forest Service Byway, so the Forest Service assisted in getting the grants to fund that Byway's corridor plan. This is a grassroots effort, and the grant for the current Parks Highway plan was applied for by the Fairbanks Convention and Visitor's Bureau.

Q: Will the Parks Highway designation eventually be continued all the way to Fairbanks?

Aneta: There is an interest in this in the Fairbanks area. I would not be surprised to receive an application for this later in 2007, although I don't know if it would be approved.

Q: How did this section of the Parks Highway become a Scenic Byway?

Aneta: The file contains a certificate from the commissioner, dated 1998, designating this and 5 other Byways; this is the only information in the file. Other sources at DOT have indicated that DOT met with business leaders along the highway before the designation was approved; I do not know if an application was filed. The current process is more structured than when the program was first created.

Penny asked if further questions could be held until after her presentation on the Corridor Partnership Plan; this was agreed to.

Penny presented details of the Parks Highway Scenic Byway Corridor Partnership Plan.

The plan is "an expression of local desires." Stakeholders will decide what will and will not be in the plan. The plan is intended to identify and assess key resources along the Scenic Byway.

After the plan is written, the Byway would be able to apply for national Byway status, if the stakeholders decide to do so.

Public involvement is the driving force in the process.

Future meetings will be held in other communities along the Byway.

Project goals include:

- Forming a grass-roots task force of stakeholders to guide development of the plan
- Identify and value the resources of the Parks Byway
- Prepare and distribute a Corridor Partnership Plan
- Support implementation of the plan
- Support designation of other segments, if desired by stakeholders

A draft project timeline was presented.

The proposed grass-roots task force was described in depth.

Penny opened the floor to questions.

[Q: What will compel DOT to cooperate with the Corridor Partnership Plan?](#)

Penny: I have seen examples of positive development as a result of plans for other Byways, but will allow Aneta to answer the question in more depth.

Aneta: DOT does not get involved. The state Byway program can enter into grant agreements for projects with any public agency or non-profit organization. If projects are proposed within DOT right-of-way, then DOT engineers will have to be involved, but you implement the plan, not DOT.

Bill Kiger: an excellent way to deal with DOT concerns is to involve a DOT planner in the grass-roots task force; this has worked well on other the Glen Highway Scenic Byway.

Aneta: DOT's involvement is primarily to make sure that grant monies are spent according to the plan. The grantee is in charge of the project, not DOT.

Q: Can you give any examples of road safety improvement projects?

Aneta: We have not had a project in that category in Alaska. It requires demonstrating that the safety improvement is needed as a result of increased traffic brought on by the Byway designation. A project of this type could be done, but would require prior research. Common projects have included restoring historic buildings and creating interpretive materials. Another limitation on road improvements is that they require huge amounts of funding.

Q: Is state Scenic Byway status required prior to national status?

Aneta: Yes.

Q: Does national status come with additional regulations?

Penny: The only regulation I am aware of prohibits large billboards. This has already been addressed by Alaskan voters.

Aneta: Except for billboard regulations, which would be moot for Alaska, there are no additional regulations.

Q: Could the Byway lose its status if it was developed with strip malls and other undesirable scenery?

Aneta: DOT or the federal highway administration could potentially take the designation away; this has never happened in Alaska, and only once that I am aware of in the entire country.

Q: This is an important question; business owners along the highway want to know how this might impede them.

Aneta: It doesn't. This is a great program if you want to encourage visitors to your area. The only valid reason I've heard from a community that did not want the plan is that they did not want tourism.

Q: So you're making these grants available to help build facilities that will be needed as a result of this designation?

Aneta: Right.

Penny: In the case of the Parks Highway, visitors are already coming. This program could potentially create essential services for them, such as restrooms.

Aneta: This process can also be used to raise public awareness of resources along the Byway, other than Denali National Park, which everyone already knows about.

Q: Has funding ever been used to create footbridges across rivers for pedestrian traffic?

Aneta: Not with Scenic Byway funds. It could qualify for funding. Alaska's Scenic Byway funds are divided among all of the Byways that have a development plan, which makes it hard to implement large projects like a footbridge. Large projects along Scenic Byways have been funded by earmarks. Having a Corridor Partnership Plan will increase your ability to encourage DOT to work on large projects.

Q: Can these plans influence bicycle paths and natural gas pipeline alignments along the Scenic Byway?

Aneta: It's your plan, and can be used to address anything you want.

Q: If you construct a restroom, who does the maintenance on it?

Aneta: We want you to do that. DOT does not want to be involved in maintenance, since we don't have the funds for it.

Q: The Parks Highway Corridor Management Plan was awarded in 2004; why are we just now hearing about it?

Aneta: The grant was not awarded and funding secured until 2005. Then, there was not time to hire a consultant or DNR to do the plan until last September or October.

Q: This is primarily a marketing plan, for communities along the highway to enhance their section of the highway, to encourage travelers?

Aneta: You can address a lot of issues, including marketing in the plan.

Penny: The plan can also address areas along the Byway which local communities would prefer not to see developed.

Q: In a practical manner, isn't the plan regulatory in that grant applications are limited to what is in the plan?

Aneta: We do have grant criteria. Regardless of the plan, if the project doesn't fall within the seven categories for projects, it will not be funded – this is a federal highway administration standard.

Q: But if it did, and was not in the plan, it would not be funded?

Aneta: That is correct.

Penny: By non-regulatory, I meant that this plan does not tell people what to do.

Aneta: The public community process determines the plan, so approving funds for projects not in the plan would be going against the community's desires.

Q: If time goes by and the plan needs to be updated, can this be done?

Aneta: Yes, the plan is not static.

Q: Would updating the plan involve rewriting the entire thing?

Aneta: In reality, most plans are vague enough that it is not problematic to process grant applications.

Q: Would the plan preclude future development, using other funding, that is not included in the plan?

Penny: It would just preclude accessing Scenic Byways funds for those developments.

Bill Kiger: Until you modified the plan.

Aneta: Because funds are limited, we want to see that they go to projects that folks have agreed are priorities in their area; the way that I know your priorities are by reading them in your plan.

Q: How much money are we talking about?

Aneta: About \$500,000 to \$600,000 annually, without earmarks, for the entire state. Only 3 Byways currently have corridor plans, which are required to apply for funding.

Q: If there are more applications than funding, how do you decide who is funded?

Aneta: a review team meets and uses criteria, available on the Byways website, to decide. Well thought out, locally supported applications are more likely to succeed than those that are not well thought out or locally supported.

Q: How can funding be leveraged from additional sources?

Aneta: This year, a lot of applicants are also getting funding from "Save America's Treasures," as well as Scenic Byways and some private sources – using multiple sources for some of their projects.

Q: Is there a way to get additional funding from a national highway authorization?

Aneta: Right now, Scenic Byway designation does not have any effect on that funding.

Penny asked if there were additional questions. None were forthcoming, and she suggested moving into a brainstorming session, to generate ideas and identify projects that the stakeholders would like to see along the Byway.

A brainstorming group was formed at each table to identify projects and priorities. Groups presented ideas to the entire meeting, including:

- Better trailheads and markings to indicate resources on each trail
- Keeping the look and feel the same
- No strip malls
- Increased interpretation
- Support infrastructure, such as restrooms
- Making the Byway an experience, not just a means of travel
- Expanding trails
- Concentrating services to maintain open space
- Parking, interpretation, and trash cans at a rest area in Cantwell
- A footbridge at McKinley Village
- Bike trails along the entire Byway
- More rest areas
- A commercial brochure for the Byway
- Turn lanes at the Village and the Park Entrance
- Year round rest areas
- A bike path at Cantwell and Anderson
- Pedestrian bridges at river crossings
- Put a sign up on the blank signboard

- Collect campground fees to help cover costs
- Smoothing out the highway
- Improved river access
- Bike paths borough wide
- A destination facility at 8 Mile Lake
- A footbridge across the river at the Old Highway, with a parking area on the north side for Nenana River and Triple Lakes trails.
- A wayside and restroom at MP 234
- A wayside at MP 221

A concern was raised that the Fairbanks Convention and Visitor's Bureau might have a large influence on the development of the currently designated Parks Highway Scenic Byway, particularly if residents along the current Byway did not take an interest. Bill Kiger stated that if local stakeholders did not take an interest, his program would not develop the Corridor Management Plan, and would return funding for the plan to DOT.

Penny asked if there were additional comments or concerns. She invited the participants to let her know if there are additional people who could not attend the meeting, who should be involved.

Penny asked that anyone who is interested in being part of the grass-roots task force please indicate it on their survey, which they received at the door.

Q: How does the railroad fit in this process?

Penny: They are a stakeholder; they were invited to this meeting but did not attend.

Penny thanked the participants for coming to the meeting, and concluded the meeting at approximately 7:20pm.