

Southeast Alaska Transportation Plan 2014 Draft Sitka, Alaska / Meeting Summaries

Introduction

The Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) issued a draft Southeast Alaska Transportation Plan (SATP) for public review in June 2014. On August 20, 2014, DOT&PF held an evening open house and public meeting in Sitka, Alaska, at the Centennial Hall, and during the day met with the Sitka Tribe of Alaska Transportation Director, several representatives from the City and Borough of Sitka, and met with the Chief Operating Officer of Shee Atika Corporation.

A combined total of 24 people attended these meetings (see attached attendance list).

DOT&PF Presentation at Open House/Public Meeting

The public meeting began with a PowerPoint presentation that reviewed:

- The DOT&PF statutory obligation to develop and maintain the Southeast Alaska Transportation Plan, as a component of the Alaska Long Range Transportation Plan. The SATP directs investment in the regional transportation system over a 20-year period, identifying current priorities and guiding development of projects.
- The SATP was first published in 1980 and was updated and revised in 1986, 1999, and 2004 as an approved component of the Statewide Transportation Plan. To prepare the current update, DOT&PF conducted a scoping process in 2011, which led to development of the Draft SATP document in 2014.
- The comment period for this Draft SATP document is open until September 30, 2014. Written comments can be submitted to DOT&PF via email, mail or fax.
- It was noted that there are also current National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) processes for several projects that have separate comment periods and official administrative records. These include the proposed East Lynn Canal Highway, Angoon Airport and the proposed road connection from Kake to Petersburg. Comments intended for consideration by an EIS must be submitted to the project manager of each EIS during its open comment periods.
- Trends for the Existing Transportation System – The Draft SATP analyzed and responds to trends that show a *decrease* in Southeast Alaska population, traffic on the Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS) and funding for transportation projects, coupled with *increases* in operations, maintenance and construction costs.

- Since 2006, AMHS Southeastern System annual maintenance and operation costs have increased from about \$110M to nearly \$140M, while ferry sailings have dropped from about 6,500/year to 6,000 year in that period.
 - From 1991-2012, passenger ridership has declined from approximately 370,000 to 310,000/year, with vehicle traffic holding fairly steady at approximately 100,000 vehicles/year. Over that time, the ferry fleet has increased from six to ten ferries.
- The SATP considers many factors: three aging mainline ferries, comments received on the Scoping Report, interest in continuing existing ferry routes, cost to maintain the existing transportation system, regional transportation needs, current priorities and projects, and funding forecasts.
- Alternatives – The SATP considered four options, described in more detail and compared in Appendix C of the draft plan: (1) Baseline system (maintain existing), SATP Preferred Alternative, (3) Maximize Use of Existing Roads and (4) Highway Route 7
- Recommendations – The Draft SATP recommends maintaining all existing highway and ferry routes and provides improvements that will further increase the mobility of people and goods, such as new road links. It also includes measures to help reduce some system costs, such as retirement or replacement of aging mainliners and use of day boats. It recommends the following specific changes to the transportation system, that would (1) better match capacity to demand, (2) keep ferry service to Bellingham, (3) keep cross Gulf ferry service, and (4) emphasize labor and fuel efficiency:
 - 2016 & 2017 (now 2018) – Two new Alaska Class Dayboats (ACD) ferries to service Lynn Canal
 - 2018 – Angoon Airport completed
 - 2020 – Lynn Canal Highway to Katzehin and ferry terminal completed
 - 2020 – Haines-Skagway shuttle ferry service initiated
 - 2020 – Kake-Petersburg Road (gravel single land), Wrangell Narrows shuttle ferry, and terminals completed
 - 2025 – New mainline ferry on-line; potential for a second mainline ferry to follow
 - 2028 – Fast ferry replacement
 - 2033 – Sitka-Warm Springs Bay road initiated (planning, environmental, design). Construction is not anticipated during the 20-year planning period.
- Capital costs over the next 20 years to maintain and implement the preferred alternative total \$1.3B for system refurbishments and \$1.2B for major projects (construction, procurement), respectively. The Plan reduces the annual operation and maintenance expense of the overall regional transportation system three percent. (Noted that the preferred alternative is not the least expensive alternative, as maximizing the use of existing roads or constructing Highway Route 7 would reduce annual costs by 15% to 16%, respectively.)

- The Draft SATP document also includes information about continuing efforts to maintain and improve the transportation system in Southeast Alaska, provides an overview of the existing system, identifies undeveloped essential transportation and utility corridors in the region (App. A), describes the scoping process and public comments (App. B), compares the four planning alternatives (App. C) and provides public and government involvement plans (App. D).
- The Draft Plan recommendations would have the following impacts on Sitka:(1) Continue fast ferry service, (2) More frequent mainline ferry service north & south, and (3) Develop plans for more efficient lower cost ferry connection (Sitka – Warm Spring Bay).

Questions & Answers, Comments

key

- Comment or Question
 - DOT&PF Response

Warm Spring Bay Road

- What kind of a road will Warm Spring Bay Road be?
 - Current plans call for a two-lane road to be maintained year-round. This will be evaluated in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).
- More information on the Warm Spring Bay Road is needed. It is important for the community to support the Warm Spring Bay Road; we need open community dialogue.
- The Warm Spring Bay Road is a 2014 Sitka Assembly priority; this is where residents should direct their attention if there is a concern. The following organizations are believed to have passed resolutions in support of the Warm Spring Bay Road: Sitka Tribe of Alaska, Sitka Chamber of Commerce, Shee Atika, and Sitka Economic Development Association. The declining level of ferry service in Sitka, especially in the winter, is of great concern.
- Other businesses in Sitka may support the Warm Bay Spring Road in the future; this has not been a focus of community discussion yet.
- Is the possible Hatchery in this area compatible with the Warm Spring Bay development?
 - Yes
- If there were a catastrophic loss of the Warm Spring Bay Road, would service come back to Sitka on a temporary or permanent basis?
 - Yes
- Would it be possible to run an electric train along the Warm Spring Bay Road for transit?
 - This is not being considered at this time.
- Before the Warm Spring Bay Road design and other work occur there should be a cost benefit analysis and an evaluation of road feasibility. Anything can be built with enough funding, but is this practicable?
- If population declined in Sitka in the future, will DOT&PF still build the Warm Spring Bay Road? What is the commitment to this project?

Takatz Lake Hydroelectric & Warm Spring Bay Road

- Warm Spring Bay Road is a logical route choice because it would facilitate the Takatz Lake Hydroelectric project.
- Looks like Takatz Lake Hydro is ideal for a lake tap; this will reduce cost per KWH produced dramatically. Takatz will increase the amount of energy Sitka outputs by 75%; after Takatz, the next project is an intertie to Kake.
- Is DOT&PF considering the Integrated Resource Plan (IRP) for energy in the region as it works on the SATP and identifies its 20-year improvements? The City and Borough of Sitka is using the IRP, and this is one reason why we support joint work on Takatz Lake Hydro and Warm Spring Bay Road.

State-City Partnerships

- Add language to the SATP to allow consideration of creative and innovative solutions and partnerships for transportation and related improvements. Could cities/boroughs and the State do joint Capital Improvement planning and funding? Could we formally partner and share costs and build together? The City and Borough of Sitka invested \$150 million into Blue Lake because it's imperative to our future; so is the ferry. The "marriage" of Takatz Lake Hydro and the Sitka Warm Spring Bay Road and ferry terminal is a natural alliance. How do we "piggy-back" these projects to our mutual benefit?

Cross-Baranof Road Alternatives

- For a Cross-Baranof Route, the least expensive one to build is probably the one Shee Atika would favor.
- Sitka Tribe of Alaska favors Warm Spring Bay Road because it minimizes impact to its historical sites.
- What does it take to remove a project from the SATP? For example, the Cross-Baranof Island Road – there has not been a cost-benefit analysis yet. What if it is not practical or not what the community wants?
 - These decisions depend on many factors, policy calls, funding, timing etc. Nothing will be built unless the community supports it.
- I am a Warm Spring Bay property owner; why put the road here rather than any of the other alternatives?
 - This is closest to Chatham Strait and has more support in Sitka. However, when the EIS is prepared it will likely consider all alternatives and assess the full environmental, economic, and sociocultural effects.

SATP Not Meeting Sitka Transportation Needs

- The City and Borough of Sitka is disappointed that DOT&PF is not recognizing City and Borough of Sitka transportation needs in the SATP; a 20-year out project (Warm Spring Bay Road) is not sufficient.
- Sitka needs better road and ferry transportation. Want to a Cross-Baranof Road built sooner, and better ferry service to and from Sitka.

Ferry Service Decline

- When ferry service between Sitka and Angoon declined this hurt cultural connections.
- Sitka ferry service is so reduced – especially in the winter - that it has crossed a tipping point and ferries aren't a functional option. That is one reason why ridership is going down.
- If population of Sitka and Juneau is increasing, why is there a drop in ferry ridership?

Fuel Efficiency

- Has the SOLAS repower been done on the Columbia? Another commenter mentions that its smokestack is polluting and a fine was levied in Bellingham.
 - Yes, the repower is done and its fuel efficiency has increased as a result.

Funding

- Where is the funding for SATP projects coming from if federal transportation funding is declining?
- Will there be funding in 20 years to build Warm Spring Bay Road?

Use of Mainline Ferries Post-Juneau Access

- Completion of Juneau Access will allow turning mainline ferries around in Juneau and freeing up mainline ferries for increased regional trips, potentially up to 4 more per week to or from Sitka (per DOT&PF). Ferry schedulers would make these decisions in the future though, not this SATP. Who is the “competition” for more service to Sitka?
 - Other options are laying ferries up to reduce costs, retiring a ferry because the capacity is not needed, or some combination of service to Hoonah, Kake and Angoon (some in combination with Sitka stops)

Juneau Access

- Is Juneau Access litigation over?
 - DOT&PF lost and we are now doing a supplemental EIS to address points raised.
- Are Alaska Class Dayboat (ACD) ferry construction dates firm given uncertainties of Juneau Access? Is DOT&PF “jumping the gun” on building the ACD if Juneau Access is at risk?
 - DOT&PF needs the ACD to replace a mainline ferry regardless of Juneau Access. When the two ACD are built the mainline ferry in the worst shape will be retired.

Hollis Route

- Was Hollis still being served by the AMHS in 1997? DOT&PF responds yes, and commenter follows up by asking if that route was a moneymaker?
 - No, it was not. The Inter-Island Ferry Authority however has a high fare box recovery as it is charging more than AMHS did for that run.

Angoon as Feeder Ferry Hub

- What happened to concept of Angoon as a hub with feeder ferries to Sitka, and other places?

- This was in the 1999 SATP, but removed a few years later because regular service seemed difficult to provide. The Fairweather ferry was built in response. This was evaluated as part of the Highway 7 alternative in the 2011 SATP Scoping process.

Commitment to Rural Alaska

- A bigger philosophical question: Is the State and Legislature thinking about sustaining rural Alaska, including Southeast, in its investments? It used to be that Alaska as a whole identified with being a remote place; this was a shared value. Now it seems sometimes like investments are all gravitating to the urban core and the rest of the state is slowly becoming impoverished. Is there concern about rural areas and the attendant social problems there? This is linked to the City and Borough of Sitka concern that our transportation needs, which are a vital economic link, are not being considered.

Private Sector Opportunity

- It doesn't look like the Draft SATP considers the private enterprise system; I think some private services would be willing to provide transportation if they too got \$2 dollars from the state for every \$1 dollar they spent.
 - Actually private barges are moving 90% of the freight in Southeast Alaska already, with private planes doing most of the rest (with some Essential Air Service Subsidy (EAS)). In addition, barge companies provide their landside facilities. The BC ferries have gone with privatization; they contract with the private sector to provide ferry service and provide a set subsidy for a given level of service, which is negotiated periodically.

SATP Annual Cost Savings

- Slide 10 looks like the SATP Recommendation is to spend an extra \$500 million in capital projects to save \$3 million a year in operating costs?
 - That is true, but what is not on slide 10 is the increased capacity to travel in the region as a result of Juneau Access, mainline ferries turning around in Juneau, an airport in Angoon, two new Alaska Class Dayboat ferries, and a new mainline ferry (and retirement of older mainline ferries).

State Support /Subsidy Should be More Explicit in SATP

- The Plan seems focused on decreasing operating costs; have you also considered increasing income?
 - Yes - and ferry fare box recovery is approximately 30% for the system, so the state contributes \$2 for each \$1 made through revenue. The commenter responds that it would be useful to show and make this information more clearly in the SATP as these revenue, income, and subsidy considerations are important and need explaining in the plan. This will help people understand the decisions being made and the trade-offs.

Don't Jeopardize EPA Utility Exemption

- Page 11 –Warm Spring Bay Road. Two years ago Southeast Alaska received an exemption from an EPA requirement linked to being on the National Highway System (NHS) that

would have forced utilities to invest millions of dollars for diesel retrofits for very seldom-used (back-up) equipment. The exemption was part of NOT being on the NHS; make sure we don't jeopardize this exemption inadvertently through language in the SATP.

- We are unaware of this exemption, but Sitka does already have NHS routes, both road and ferry.

Other

- Sitka Tribe of Alaska and the City and Borough of Sitka are planning to increase collaboration on transportation. A City and Borough of Sitka Engineer will join Sitka Tribal Transportation Committee meetings. We intend to do more joint prioritization of projects.
- Page 20 – Are 4407 easements from SAFETEA-LU?
 - Yes
- The MV Susitna is for sale now at rock bottom prices.
- Page 23 – Cool that Alaska is a top state for walking.

Draft Southeast Alaska Transportation Plan
Attendance at Sitka, Alaska meetings
August 20, 2014

Open House and Public Meeting

1. Andrew Thoms
2. Carol Goularte
3. Dorik Mechau
4. Frank Rogers, Jr.
5. Garry White
6. Gerry Hope
7. James Poulson
8. John Dull
9. Larry Edwards
10. Marian Allen
11. Mark Gorman
12. Melissa Dinsmore
13. Mim McConnell
14. Perry Edwards
15. Rebecca Poulson
16. Rich McClear
17. Ritchie Phillips
18. Robert Woolsey
19. Thad Poulson

Sitka City Meeting

1. Mark Gorman, City and Borough of Sitka, Manager Christopher
2. Jay Sweeney, City and Borough of Sitka, Finance Director
3. Brewton, City and Borough of Sitka, Power
4. Dan Tadic, City and Borough of Sitka, Engineer

Sitka Tribe of Alaska (STA) Meeting

1. Gerry Hope, STA Transportation Director

ADOT&PF Team

Andy Hughes, DOT&PF

Marie Heidemann, DOT&PF

Barbara Sheinberg, Sheinberg Associates