



NEWS RELEASE

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Assembly passes resolution on Port MacKenzie Rail project

PALMER—Matanuska-Susitna Borough Assemblymembers passed a resolution tonight (Tues.), on the Port MacKenzie Rail project. The resolution accompanies a preliminary report that will be sent to the Surface Transportation Board, the federal entity that approves new rail lines in the nation.

The Assembly did not adopt a preference for a particular route.

Sponsored by Assemblymember Cindy Bettine, the resolution seeks to focus the attention of the federal board on important social, economic, and environmental issues during an upcoming environmental study.

“All three routes go across my district, that’s why I’m so involved in it,” Bettine said.

Bettine made multiple amendments to the resolution, including a request for the environmental study to fully explore the potential effect of rail line use along any of the proposed corridors, and on future community development with special attention to residential housing and commercial development and other economic development opportunities.

An STB-approved contractor will be conducting the environmental study, likely an environmental impact statement. That contract has not been awarded yet, but is expected to begin in the spring and continue for 18 months.

Assemblymember Michelle Church was also among her peers in adding some amendments to the resolution. “This resolution is simply saying we’re ready to go to the next step. We want to look at lots more that the STB comes up with.”

Before the resolution, members from the project team addressed how the matrix of strengths and weaknesses on the proposed corridors is a starting point.

Joe Perkins is a consultant for the Borough on the project. He is also a former Commissioner of the Alaska Dept. of Transportation. “The reason we've done this matrix is to give the STB ten measurable areas, where hopefully they can validate the information we have and can speed up the EIS, (Environmental Impact Statement.)”

The Assembly will have more chances to comment. The Surface Transportation Board could reach a decision as early as mid 2009.

Perkins highlighted that some of the public comments helped refine the corridors, and, he said, the STB will pay attention to public comments.

All public comments and a sizeable bibliography of local, state, and federal plans, reports, and studies, pertinent to the project area, will be forwarded to the STB as part of the preliminary information.

Project manager for the Alaska Railroad Corporation, Brian Lindamood, discussed how the Castle Mountain earthquake fault was considered.

“Railroad tracks tend to survive very well,” Lindamood said. “During the 9.2 earthquake we had three trains operating from Wasilla to Seward, none of them derailed.” Lindamood further said that the Railroad designs the tracks to codes that anticipate big magnitude quakes, and the Railroad has emergency response plans in place.

Borough Manager John Duffy emphasized that the preliminary nature of these recent studies. “What we are submitting is not binding on the STB. They will likely look at other variants and other corridors ... And there's a whole other section yet to weigh in here—socio-economics, that is going to have a significant bearing on the proposed corridor.” Duffy said.

Tuesday night, 17 members of the public commented on the project during the nearly three-hour work session/special meeting. Those comments and comments from a Nov. 20 meeting will be added to the 317 comments already gathered for the report.

Communities have come out with diverse opinions. Among them: the Willow Chamber of Commerce and the Big Lake Chamber of Commerce passed resolutions in support of the Willow route; the Willow Area Community Organization as well as trails groups passed resolutions opposing the Willow route. Houston Chamber of Commerce supports the Houston South proposed route, among many other opinions.

The resolution will be posted on the Web site as soon as it is finalized. The documents the Assembly reviewed today are posted with this press release and will also be posted on the project Web site at www.portmacrail.com

The information presented was developed over the last five months by the engineering and environmental consultants under the guidance of the Borough/Railroad project team. Technical data, extensive research, and information provided by public comments are reflected in the work.

The project team held several public meetings, including five open houses, as well as meetings with specific groups such as The Willow Dog Musers Association, the Iditarod Trail Committee Executive Director, numerous state and federal agencies, and large landowners such as CIRI Corporation, among others. So far, more than 317 comments have been received and will be forwarded with the application to build and operate the project. Public hearings will be held during an upcoming environmental study.

The rail extension project is a joint effort between the Mat-Su Borough and the Alaska Railroad Corporation. This year, the state of Alaska directed \$10 million to the project's environmental document and related studies.

Please continue checking the project Web site www.portmacrail.com

A summary of public comments will be posted on the project Web site. A newsletter is in the mail and will update those on the mailing list. The Web site will remain active during the future environmental study process, announcing meetings among other information.

A binder of all public comments and agency comments is at Patty Sullivan's desk, please call ahead. For more information call Patty Sullivan, Mat-Su Borough Public Affairs Director at (907) 745-9577 or 355-0103. Or Project Manager for the Borough, Brad Sworts, at 746-7430. Or Tim Thompson, Railroad Manager of External Affairs (907) 265-2695.

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