



NEWS RELEASE

CONTACT: PATTY SULLIVAN, (907) 745-9577 or 355-0103

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Assembly calls for work session on Port Mac Rail project

PALMER—Location alternatives for a rail route that will spur significant economic development for the Borough and the State were presented as part of a status report to the Matanuska-Susitna Borough Assembly tonight (Tues. Nov. 20).

Assembly Members listened to an overview of the project and studied a matrix of the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed railroad routes. In all, there are eight proposed routes, including the different proposed connectors.

Assembly Member Cindy Bettine asked that an Assembly resolution be added to the rail project application that is being submitted to a federal board. The resolution would express concerns related to growth trends and how the railroad extension would affect future development, among others.

“We all support this high-speed freight train to our Port as a statewide legacy project,” Bettine said. “I think this Assembly needs to have input and time to evaluate the matrix.” Bettine asked for a work session. A date was set for Dec. 11.

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.

Many public comments helped refine the proposed corridors, said Project Manager for the Railroad, Brian Lindamood. “The public pointed out a lot of things that weren’t really evident. They provided depth in certain areas, such as soils issues near Horse Shoe Lake and land use such as the snow machine trails and access to recreational areas.”

The project team held numerous 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, 269 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.

After the meeting, Brad Sworts, project manager for the Borough, said an Environmental Impact Statement normally includes the socio-economic effect of a project on a community. "We concentrated on the environmental and engineering aspects of the project because we knew the EIS would look at the socio-economic impacts."

Throughout the fact-finding stage, the project team has tried to avoid or minimize direct impacts to property when considering proposed alignments. The corridors are still highly conceptual.

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.

"The reason we are doing this is to provide information to the people who will be preparing the EIS. The more information, the better off we are," said Joe Perkins, project consultant for the Borough as well as a former State Dept. of Transportation Commissioner. "We provided Alaska-specific information that we thought they needed, to save them time," Perkins said.

The environmental study could begin in the spring and continue for 18 months.

The matrix or table compares the eight proposed rail routes by considering ten criteria: poor soils, new road crossings, land availability, developed parcels, designated land use, train energy, wetlands, mapped anadromous fish streams, potential for archaeological sites, and fragmentation of designated recreation areas or refuges.

The preliminary cost estimates were also included. The figures do not include the approximately \$10 million for a loop track at Port MacKenzie as this improvement will be common to all routes.

Connecting Port MacKenzie by rail will help diversify the State and Borough economy, Borough Manager John Duffy has said at open houses. "This is a project that has statewide benefits. Our state has to become less dependent on the dwindling oil reserves. The rail project will develop new natural resources near Fairbanks," Duffy said. "When the natural gas pipeline gets going, shipping the massive construction materials through Port MacKenzie will be the most cost effective for the state."

The federal Surface Transportation Board ultimately approves where the route will go. The STB will hold its own public process as part of the environmental evaluation under the National Environmental Policy Act. The Surface Transportation Board could reach a decision in mid 2009.

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 will update those on the mailing list in early December. 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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