



CITY OF WASILLA

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COUNCIL INFORMATION MEMORANDUM NO. 94-37

From: City Planner

Date: December 7, 1994

Subject: Soldotna Trip Report - Investigation related to Alaska Department of Transportation/Public Facilities Proposed Highway Project IR-OA4-1(8) 59117, Parks Highway M.P. 35-44.

SOLDOTNA TRIP

A group of local business people met with the Mayor, Public Works Director and City Planner on November 23, 1994, to discuss the potential impacts of the above referenced project (see attached letter from Bob Andres). At this meeting, the City of Soldotna was mentioned as a community located along a State highway that has successfully incorporated a five-lane highway design through its commercial core area.

The Mayor, City Planner and a Mat-Su Borough Planner traveled to Soldotna on Wednesday, November 30, 1994, to attend a meeting of the Soldotna Downtown Main Street Committee (SDMC). The SDMC is developing a planning process to consider ways of improving the appearance, safety and functional capability of the Soldotna commercial core area. The Committee is presently organizing a multi-disciplinary planning process to include architects, landscape architects, planners, and interested municipal officials from around the State to participate in this process. The Alaska Department of Transportation/Public Facilities (ADOT) is also providing a representative to the planning process, which may serve as a model for other communities along Alaska's highways.

The attached article from the Peninsula Dispatch, dated November 29, 1994, more fully describes the intent and purpose of the planning process now being developed. A town meeting of residents and business people from Soldotna and the surrounding area will consider all of the issues relating to the commercial core area in order to develop a plan that will guide the future development of the area.

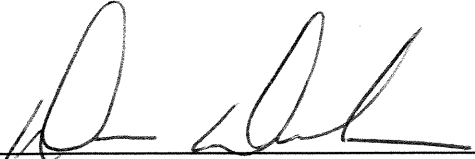
While in Soldotna, staff took photographs of the existing five-lane highway through the core business area and a segment of five-lane highway through the nearby town of Sterling. These photographs will be reviewed to determine the extent to which parallels can be drawn between Soldotna and Wasilla. As a follow-up to the trip, staff is gathering additional information from the Soldotna area to more fully understand the context for planning there.

LOCAL HIGHWAY ISSUES

The Mat-Su Borough planning staff is preparing an analysis of the divided highway/frontage road and five-lane highway designs proposed for Wasilla. The city administration is checking with a qualified planning consultant to review the Borough study when it is completed and make recommendations to the city as to how it should respond to the study conclusions. The City is presently reviewing the transportation element of its comprehensive plan. Perhaps a more in-depth study of the Parks Highway improvements project could be included in this ongoing planning process. In this way, the Wasilla Planning Commission could provide a forum, similar to the one being developed in Soldotna, to obtain a broader range of input from the community on this issue.

The concerns expressed about the Parks Highway improvement project have come primarily from Wasilla businesses that are likely to be affected by the project. This project will, no doubt, have some impact on everyone who lives, works and does business in the Wasilla community. Therefore, it seems logical and prudent to try to involve all community residents and business owners in the decision making process. An issue of this importance should be considered by the entire Wasilla community, with as much information available as possible, upon which to form a consensus. A consensus of opinion, developed by an informed community through a well documented planning process, is likely to exert more influence on the the design choices of ADOT than a handfull of letters written by the city administration.

The City Planner is still researching this issue. A file is being kept of all correspondence relating to the Parks Highway improvement project. This information may be helpful to identify issues and interested persons that should be included in a planning process. Staff will up-date the council on this issue in January after the Borough design study has been released.



Duane Dvorak,
City Planner

Info Duane P/C

BACKGROUND

In recent months, the City of Wasilla backed a capital move, the Borough spent a million dollars to support the Point McKenzie Port all of which were aimed at creating jobs for this area; what I promote, along with others, is a highway system that allows access to retailers. This will accomplish two things that the City and Borough want, better traffic conditions and jobs. Our future or lack of it starts with how we provide roads, sewer, water, and access for business to operate. The expansion of the Parks Highway is important, so is the extension of the Palmer/Wasilla Highway to Knik, and the Palmer/Wasilla Highway to Seward Meridian. These are things that we can control, if they are done correctly, will help insure our future; talk of by-passes and divided highways will insure our demise, or at the least not provide the type of jobs, growth, road service, etc. that will be needed in future.

DIVIDED HIGHWAY WITH FRONTAGE ROAD; WHY THEY DON'T WORK!

1. **LOCATION/LOCATION/LOCATION:** Divided highways eliminate all three possibilities. High volume retailers have not located from Tudor Road to Huffman along the divided Seward Highway, as they would rather fill in old swamp area and build where they have access to the General Public. Has anyone ever seen a major retailer locate on a frontage road off of a divided highway here in Alaska or anywhere in the Lower 48?

2. **LOW VOLUME BUSINESS MEANS A LOWER TAX COLLECTION & JOBS:** Frontage roads are great for storage location units, sewer plants, apartment buildings, or destination stops. These types of businesses do not hire lots of people to operate, and will generate very little tax revenue. This will lead to a substantially lower tax base and could ultimately cause the City to feel the squeeze which we will all feel.

3. **LOSS OF JOBS:** The divided highway system will put some current retailers out of business or force them to lay off permanently a portion of their staff. Sales will drop drastically which in turn will reduce the City's tax revenues based on sales.

4. **SOLDOTNA/KENAI:** The Kenai area put in a five (5) lane with a two way left turn. This system handles more traffic than Wasilla and has caused a retail boom in the area, created numerous jobs, raised City revenues, and kept the money in the local economy for the benefit of all. I talked with Dave Bunnell, the Director of Public Works in Soldotna, who stated that his recommendation would be against a divided highway for all of the reasons I have listed above and more.

5. **FUTURE:** The State of Alaska faces a billion dollar deficit and funds available to help cities will be vastly curtailed in the coming years. Wasilla on the other hand because of fiscal restraints that have been employed in the past will not or may not suffer the cut back that other less aggressive cities will face such as reduced police departments, city staff, wage freezes, road service maintenance, etc.

6. **DEMOGRAPHICS:** Our area now has the population that will support high volume retailers, if we build it correctly, they will come!

In closing, the Cities of Kenai and Soldotna took an active interest in protecting their business, fought D.O.T. on reducing meridians, installed a five (5) lane with a two way left turn and have flourished. A five lane will result in more restaurants, hotels/motels, and the type of facilities that will allow Wasilla to compete with other cities in hosting conventions, create an economy where the money stays within the community, create jobs, and most importantly fund a City government that if used correctly will enhance all of our lives. We need the City to come out in favor of a five (5) lane highway, in form D.O.T. that the City will not support frontage roads and work with us on providing access that will create jobs, etc. With your help, thoughts, and actions, we have a chance to have what a lot of communities wish for, adequate City government and services, jobs, economic growth, great schools, etc., if we build the proper road system.

Sincerely,

Bob Andres

Upcoming town meeting defined as a way to revitalize Sterling Highway through Soldotna

By Pat Schmidt
Peninsula Dispatch

Taking almost everything into consideration, Soldotna is a star city. It's a city where people can safely raise their children in a good environment and offer them a good education. It's the hub of the Kenai Peninsula, a great place for fishing and enjoying the outdoors and it's big enough to give everybody almost everything they need without having to go to a larger city where larger problems exist.

One thing that may be lacking though is the fact that it is not very aesthetically pleasing to residents and tourists when they pass through town on the Sterling Highway.

"Soldotna, to me right now, can be a classic case of the abso-

lute worst urban design after World War II. This is the worst signage, lack of landscape, strip development in Western America. You can come through here with a video tape and take a day, and say this is what you don't want. It looks ugly, it's horrible, it certainly is nothing to be proud of. There has to be something to change it," said Mike McLane.

Mike McLane is one of 13 members assigned to a steering committee which hopes to have some input on what the Department of Transportation (DOT) intends to do with the Sterling Highway which runs approximately from the "Y" past the Soldotna Bridge to Kalifornsky Beach Road.

He sees the street as being sort of a metaphor for the town. Once people determine what

they want the town to be and how it can be made into a better community, then something can be done to enhance the looks of the boulevard surrounding the Sterling Highway going through town to give people more of a desire to stop, instead of just zooming through to their ultimate destinations.

"Let's get a town meeting and take some responsibility. It's got to be a collective vision about 'this is a neat town we can make it a fun place to be,'" explained McLane.

A few years ago McLane said he had a brainstorm to connect an additional road to the Sterling Highway beginning at the state maintenance department and run it behind Brindley's Tesoro near the river where it would eventually meet up with the Soldotna Bridge. He believes this would be a good way to slow down the traffic and give motorists a chance to keep from zooming straight through town, provided that area had some additional stoplights and additional development. If the city took the bull by the horns McLane believes this still could become a reality and the area in between could be landscaped to make it more attractive. Crossroads intersecting this new section of road and the Sterling Highway would also enable pedestrians and motorists easier access in crossing the extremely busy Sterling Highway during the summer months.

As far as the mission of the town meeting goes, McLane hopes it will focus on more than one purpose.

"The focus now is really coming from the chance of really dialoguing as what is the heart of Soldotna, what is our community about and how can we make it better. I think it is a perfect thing to spin off the Healthy Communities forum that is going on in a large area, but taking that even to our town," said McLane.

He and the rest of the steering committee want whatever happens to our town to at least happen after the residents of Soldotna have their say—not just the professionals who usually make the recommendations and submit their

"That's the neat thing that is going to come out in the process of getting the community involved. I really see it as a neat thing, instead of these experts predetermining what our community should look like or how it should function. I don't want to be totally controlled by architects and planners, we are the folks that live here, we know what we need here to make this a better town, the trouble is we don't have a chance to talk about it much. This town meeting is a marvelous chance to get together and say 'What do we need?'" said McLane.

Bypass the 'Bypass' idea

Pat Beckley, the Kenai Area Planner assigned to DOT/PF suggests... "while the Sterling Highway project is the focus for this event, more attention should be given to a land use plan for property adjacent to the highway."

She got all of the committees' attention by suggesting perhaps a by-pass route would better accomplish local objectives to slow down the traffic and beautify the right-of-way. Rich Underkofler, Soldotna City Manager, responded that by giving notice that a by-pass is under consideration it certainly would make a lot of town folk stand up and take notice.

"Well, to me, if you look at what happened on Route 66 (I-40), the minute they bypassed towns they killed them," noted McLane.

"One of the planners from the DOT said, 'If you want to slow things down and make it more like Pioneer Avenue in Homer, why not just have a bypass?'" noted Rich Underkofler, Soldotna City Manager.

As of yet no one is sure what the DOT's preliminary design recommendations for the Spur Highway are, except maybe that they would like to eliminate the bottleneck that occurs a couple of blocks up from the bridge and replace it with a five-lane (center passing lane) road and new bridge. There may also be some additional signal lights put in.

"This is a reaction...if we don't do anything like this, what we are going to get is what you see out in Sterling—real wide bicycle and pedestrian lanes, practically an airport runway. And that is what we're going to get if we didn't intervene here, we don't want that. The

thought is, it needs to be softened and more user friendly with landscaping," said Rich Underkofler.

Underkofler also explained that areas in the state are also having problems.

Project would be 95 percent federally funded

One of the big things that hasn't been addressed is the storm drain system. The state provides the main storm drain corridor through town, according to McLane, it is totally messed up. When and if the new road is put in, which Underkofler estimates to be no sooner than 1998, that storm drain system will have to be upgraded and they may have to get into some sort of biofiltration system, such as was recently pioneered by Fred Meyer when they built their new store. Any development over five acres also requires a Corp of Engineers permit.

The engineering for this project is expected to take place in 1997. It is 95 percent federally funded with the other 5 percent assessed to the state. But the city will probably not get out of it scott-free.

"We're discussing kicking city money into it to accommodate the film-bill change, in other words increase the size of the highway drainage system so it can accommodate all drainage coming in off the hill. The city is going to have to pledge responsibility for maintaining any landscaping. There would also be some use of city money in expanding water and sewer across the highway to serve those undeveloped lots over there," noted Underkofler.

This is a joint project between the city, the DOT and the Alaska Architects Association, Alaska Planners Association and Alaska Landscape Architects Association. The word "charette" is a French term for "brainstorming."

The February Town Meeting

A preliminary agenda has already been set for the February 3rd, 4th and 5th town meetings which will be held at Soldotna High School. The first session will begin Friday afternoon at 2 p.m. with introductory presentations by six facilitators, followed by a guided tour of the site. Saturday sessions will begin at 9 a.m. and run past 7 p.m. Sunday, beginning at 1 p.m., a presentation to and from the community will take place which will end with a consensus, recommendations and remarks.

A keynote speaker, by the name of Steven Izenour, from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, has been invited to Soldotna to give his expert opinion. He is an architect and urban planner and co-author of "Learning From Las Vegas." He will give his keynote address at 9 a.m. Saturday and closing comments Sunday afternoon.

"There's an end-run document that comes out of this process, that can go nationwide, about community; planning. This process has happened before in 'Mainstreet Across America,' it's really cool," said McLane.

The two-fold purpose is to direct imminent change of road in our town, which is scheduled, but also to create some sort of model process that can be used by other towns throughout the nation and local communities such as Cooper Landing, Moose Pass, Kasilof, Ninilchik, Anchor Point and Wasilla, where other highway projects will traverse these small communities.

Other long-range benefits could be the enhancement of having additional visitors come to Soldotna in the middle of the winter and increasing the value of properties which front the mainstreets of Soldotna.

The town meeting is open to residents of all ages and all walks of life. In attendance will be design professionals and planning commissioners from all over Alaska. Six facilitators will play an important role in the meeting to keep it rolling and help generate ideas and input. They will be comprised of two architects, planners and landscape architects. Other resource people will include an urban forester, representatives from DOTPF and representatives from the Winter Cities Association and Citizens Transportation Coalition; possibly others.

Events will alternate between general sessions and group sessions. The groups might be defined as senior citizens, teenagers, non-residents (passers-through), cyclists, nature lovers, children, merchants, pedestrians and people who love to fish, it depends who shows up. Members of the community will be asked to submit what they like about the community as well as what they have to complain about.

Mike Mense, of the Alaska Chapter of American Institute of Architects, from Anchorage, said that the theme of the conference is that you can say anything you want at any time, whenever some idea comes to mind and blurt it out and put it on the wall.

According to the tentative schedule, a public presentation will be delivered to the residents of Soldotna beginning at 4 p.m. on Sunday. Steven Izenour will next address the public, followed by local representatives of the various groups presenting their conclusions. After the event, documented results will be forwarded to the Soldotna City Council and other interested agencies and communities.

The steering committee doesn't want this forum to be a boring business-like event. They have also booked the Peninsula Performers, who will give an impromptu, comic, thought provoking performance Saturday evening, based on their observations during the two previous days.

"I'm hoping we will have a good turnout. I think it's a good opportunity—we need more town meetings to get collective dialogue. Our community is becoming fragmented; the seniors just want to work with the seniors and the kids just want to have their thing for the kids. We need something for everybody, I think this is a good forum, everybody drives down the road," concluded McLane.