

# Alaska Dispatch News

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[Home](#) > State tries to balance safety, scenery in big Seward Highway project

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A \$75 million project at a popular sheep-viewing spot on the Seward Highway is inching toward construction as state planners try to balance safety with the scenery of nearby Chugach State Park.

The project at Windy Corner, about 20 miles south of Anchorage, will straighten and widen the highway using about 1.5 million cubic yards of fill, or about 450 Olympic-sized swimming pools' worth.

The project should make the road safer for commuters and for the tourists who pull off the highway to gaze and photograph the Dall sheep, which gather at a salt lick above. But the project will also come at a cost: The soil and rock that will form the highway's new platform in Turnagain Arm is expected to be mined from a nearby site within the state park.

Getting it from elsewhere, says Tom Schmid, the state Department of Transportation project manager, would delay the project and cost \$40 million extra, effectively precluding construction.

"If we're forced to go somewhere else to get material for the project, I can say it's not going to happen," Schmid said.

The fill can't be removed from the park, however, before the transportation department gets a permit from the state parks system, which requires a public process that isn't underway yet. But Schmid and state parks officials say they're proceeding deliberately and hope to ultimately offer safer travel and recreation along a 2-mile stretch of road that's seen nearly three dozen crashes that either killed people or caused major injuries in the three decades ending in 2007 — the most recent data provided by transportation officials.

“I think as long as DOT works towards balancing the need to develop a safer corridor while also understanding that it runs through a park, and people have expectations to picnic, pull over and get on trail, do some wildlife viewing, that would be in everybody’s best interests,” said Dave Griffin, who’s coordinating the project for the state’s parks division. “And working with DOT so far, they get that.”

## Step-by-step upgrades

The [Seward Highway](#) [2] between South Anchorage and Portage is hemmed in by mountains on one side and Turnagain Arm on the other. Many sections are narrow with just two lanes; it’s a federally recognized "scenic byway" but the 35-mile stretch is also known as one of the most dangerous roads in the state.

[A recent crash](#) [3] between a delivery truck and a pickup seriously injured two people — one who was ejected from the pickup — and temporarily closed the highway.

Transportation planners dream of one day transforming the road into a broad, [four-lane highway](#) [4], but that effort could cost \$500 million or more and is likely decades away.

Instead, DOT has been working for years on expanding and upgrading the highway piece by piece, widening stretches and adding passing lanes to make travel smoother for the more than 15,000 vehicles that use it on summer days.

The [Windy Corner project](#) [5] is one of the latest on the list.

Planners have been eyeing the area for more than 15 years. It's a 2-mile stretch from Milepost 105 to 107 where the highway makes three consecutive bends — including one around the aptly named Windy Point, where 40-mph gusts forced DOT to cancel two planned site visits with a reporter in September.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game says there's a natural salt lick that brings sheep to the cliffs above the highway.

There's a problem, though: The highway currently lacks turning lanes in the area, and there's only a small pullout. Transportation planners say drivers often have to brake to avoid people walking across the road, or cars that have slowed so passengers can stare at sheep — an assertion that's supported by locals who drive the highway on a daily basis.

"I almost killed a little old lady who was looking through the viewfinder of her camera and backing up into traffic," said Tommy O'Malley, a member of the board of supervisors for Girdwood, the community along the highway 30 miles southeast of Anchorage.

O'Malley estimated 40 percent of Girdwood residents commute to Anchorage, and the community largely welcomes DOT projects aimed at improving highway safety, he said.

"In any public meeting if you ask for friends of people who have died on the highway, everybody will raise their hands. It's a danger," he said.

The [project's design](#) [6] calls for the road to be straightened so that drivers don't have to negotiate the middle bend. Plans also call for the addition of a pedestrian underpass, parking areas, and turn lanes to make it easier for tourists to pull on to and off the highway.

The project also requires the 1.5 million cubic yards of fill, which will be used to support the relocated highway, and the adjacent railroad corridor. DOT wants to get the fill from a site a few miles north along the highway that sits within the 500,000-acre Chugach State Park — a plan that's drawn objections from at least one critic, Tom Meacham, a natural resources attorney in Anchorage.

Meacham wrote in a [May opinion piece](#) [7] in Alaska Dispatch News that DOT's plans would "permanently deface" the park by carving out a half-dozen gigantic rock quarries, leaving scarred cliffs like the ones currently visible at the [Bird Creek parking lot](#) [8] a few miles south of the project site.

In fact, DOT says it likely only needs one quarry — it was simply studying six options. And Meacham, in a phone interview, said state transportation planners were being "very prudent" to try to fix the traffic hazards at Windy Corner.

But he maintained that digging up the fill would still be a violation of the state law that established the state park, as well as of [a law](#) [9] that allows parkland to be used for federally funded highway improvements only if there's no "feasible and prudent alternative."

Meacham also said DOT hadn't done enough to engage Anchorage residents in the planning process — public meetings have so far only been held in Girdwood — and he questioned whether state parks staff would stick up for park users.

“Division of Parks hasn’t been very aggressive in making sure park interests are reflected or accommodated in this process,” Meacham said.

Parks planners, however, say there’s a statutory process [10], with public participation and specific criteria to be met, that must be followed before DOT can do any digging.

## Construction envisioned in 2017

No permits have been issued, and there’s no guarantee that one will be, said Griffin, the parks coordinator who’s working on the Windy Corner project.

“We have not made any decision on whether or not we would allow for the park to be opened up for the use of material,” Griffin said. “We know DOT would like to — we know that we’re expecting an application from them. And we will adjudicate that and make that determination.”

There would be a “trade-off,” Griffin added, if fill ends up being used. But he noted that the project comes with benefits — namely, a “multimillion-dollar rest stop with a sheep viewing area, and parking.”

DOT, meanwhile, says it wants to learn from its experience with the Bird Creek parking lot. Schmid, the project manager, says one idea being explored is leaving a buffer with trees around the potential Windy Corner quarry.

Trucking in the needed soil and rock, or moving it by rail from farther away, he added, is prohibitively expensive.

Schmid said he recognizes the scenic value of the area himself; as a kiteboarder, he said, he uses Turnagain Arm for his own recreation.

“I would like to think what we’re doing will benefit the park users,” he said.

DOT is currently working on securing access to the land it needs for the project, and on permitting for its quarry. More public meetings are planned [11] in December in both Girdwood and Anchorage.

Construction is expected to take at least two seasons. Schmidt says it should begin in 2017.

**Source URL:** <http://www.adn.com/article/20150919/state-tries-balance-safety-scenery-big-seward-highway-project>

### Links:

[1] <http://www.adn.com/author/nathaniel-herz>

[2] <http://www.dot.state.ak.us/stwdplng/scenic/byways-seward.shtml>

[3] <http://www.adn.com/article/20150911/2-hurt-seward-highway-collision-near-mchugh-creek>

[4] [http://projects.dowl.com/Projects/seward\\_highway\\_rdp/index.html](http://projects.dowl.com/Projects/seward_highway_rdp/index.html)

[5] <http://projects.dowl.com/projects/windycorner/index.html>

[6] [http://projects.dowl.com/projects/windycorner/documents/2015\\_09\\_03%20OVERALL.pdf](http://projects.dowl.com/projects/windycorner/documents/2015_09_03%20OVERALL.pdf)

[7] <http://www.adn.com/article/20150512/speak-windy-corner-project-will-permanently-deface-chugach-state-park>

[8] <http://www.paulcolor.com/index.php#mi=2&pt=1&pi=10000&s=23&p=0&a=0&at=0>

[9] <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/50section4f.cfm>

[10] <http://www.touchngo.com/lglcntr/akstats/aac/title11/chapter018/section025.htm>

[11] <http://projects.dowl.com/projects/windycorner/meetings.html>