

Alaska Dispatch News

Published on *Alaska Dispatch News* (<http://www.adn.com>)

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December 30, 2015

Main Image:

[IMAGEMEDIA130418202104582959](#) [1]

Main Image Caption:

A Dall sheep travels along the rocks and cliffs of Turnagain Arm near Windy Point on Thursday afternoon. April 18, 2013

I have many concerns about the proposed Seward Highway realignment at Windy Corner. Even one accident and its consequences are tragic, and the Department of Transportation's efforts to improve the safety of the Seward Highway are commendable. However, a close look at [fatality numbers presented by DOT and DOWL Engineering](#) [2] calls into question their basic assumption that straightening the Seward Highway and adding lanes, unavoidably resulting in increased speeds, will improve safety.

For instance, [according to DOT and DOWL](#) [3] the section of the highway north of Girdwood to Mile 98 had three fatalities between 1996 and July of 1999, when the speed limit was 55 mph. After the speed limit was raised to 65 mph in 1999, up until 2009, there were nine fatalities. The same trend occurred south of Girdwood between Mile 86 and Mile 88: one fatality when the speed limit was 55 mph (1996-1999), and six after the speed limit was raised to 65 mph (1999 to 2009).

The implementation of the traffic safety corridor in 2006 has had some positive effects: The section of the Seward Highway from Girdwood south to Mile 86 saw only one fatality between 2006 and 2009, compared to five fatalities between 1999 and 2006. Additionally, between Potter Marsh and Mile 86 the per-mile fatality/major injury crash percentage dropped from .0297 to .0219 after the traffic safety corridor was created.

[The proposed \\$75 million realignment at Windy Corner](#) [4] has been sold primarily as a safety improvement. However between 1996 and 2006 there were two fatalities in this section, and none between 2006 and 2009 after the traffic safety corridor was implemented. If the trend of fatalities near Girdwood after the increase in speed limit to 65 mph can be extrapolated to the Windy Corner project, a realignment based on claimed safety benefits does not make sense. I imagine people will still slam on their brakes when they see Dall sheep -- but after the Windy Corner realignment, at greatly increased speeds.

One possibility is the increased number of fatalities is due to an increase in vehicle traffic, which makes sense. [A draft review of literature on the effects of raising speed limits done in 2005](#) [5] by the Traffic Operations and Safety Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin-Madison concluded that many variables affect fatality rates. However most studies the review cites indicate an

increase in crashes and fatalities when speed limits increase. One study indicated that regardless the posted speed, drivers' speed increases as the road's geometry improves, which seems common sense. The literature review supports our view that road improvements that increase speed do not necessarily improve safety, and slower speeds potentially do. If DOT's goal is to reduce the chance of tragic loss of life, then any action that increases the number of fatalities seems counterproductive and even immoral.

Finally, others have written about the issues of turning the most visible section of Chugach State Park into a rock quarry [6]. I also question the potential loss of scenery and habitat caused by blasting 450 Olympic-sized swimming pools of rock from the park. Furthermore if DOT's goal is four lanes between Anchorage and Girdwood, and they can't afford to bring fill in from outside the park, and if Bird Creek eyesore is the precedent, then we risk Chugach State Park looking like a quarry and not a scenic gem.

DOT and DOWL have stubbornly refused to have any public meetings in Anchorage about the Windy Corner proposal. Instead, they are focusing their efforts on Girdwood and Bird Creek. I urge DOT and its contractors, DOWL and Brooks and Associates, to hold at least one public meeting in Anchorage on the Windy Corner project to address my and others' concerns.

Paul Twardock is a board member of Friends of Chugach State Park, a former member of the Chugach State Park Advisory Board and a professor of outdoor studies at Alaska Pacific University.

The views expressed here are the writer's own and are not necessarily endorsed by Alaska Dispatch News, which welcomes a broad range of viewpoints. To submit a piece for consideration, email commentary@alaskadispatch.com [7]. Send submissions shorter than 200 words to letters@alaskadispatch.com [8] or [click here to submit via any web browser](#) [9].

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Links:

[1] <http://www.adn.com/image/imagemedi130418202104582959>

[2] http://projects.dowl.com/projects/windycorner/documents/Seward_Hwy_TSC_Pre-TSCweb.pdf

[3] http://projects.dowl.com/projects/windycorner/documents/Seward_Hwy_TSC_POST-TSCweb.pdf

[4] <http://www.adn.com/article/20150919/state-tries-balance-safety-scenery-big-seward-highway-project>

[5] http://www.topslab.wisc.edu/workgroups/TSC/Speed_Limit_Lit_Review-Updated_071405.pdf

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

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