

Beaver Pond Trail



Mountain News



# Windy Corner project moving forward

By Marc Donadieu  
Turnagain Times Correspondent

The preliminary design of the Windy Corner project was presented to the public at the Girdwood Community Center on April 24.

This Seward Highway project from mileposts 105 to 107 will make significant safety improvements to the roadway, realign the Alaska Railroad tracks, and add parking with designated viewing areas on both sides of the road. The project is currently in the planning phase, with construction estimated to begin in 2016.

Steve Noble, DOWL HKM project manager, led the presentation, which was followed by questions from the public afterward. He began by speaking about the Windy Corner project's main purpose. "It's largely driven by the primary goal of improving highway safety in the corridor," he said. "We have a two-lane highway where we need to straighten out the curves."

Data collected from a 20-year period shows that the Windy Corner section of the highway has been the most dangerous with major injury crashes and fatal crashes. The new design hopes to improve safety while accommodating the multiple uses of this corridor.

"What we have is a high differential in driving speeds," Noble explained. "You get a 10 to 20 mph difference in speeds, and that is where the accidents tend to occur." Noble attributed this difference in driving speed to the way drivers use the highway. "Some people are driving through while others are slowing down to view wildlife," he said.

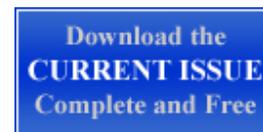
He also said what the design does not include is a 4-lane road. "We're doing a single through-lane in both directions with deceleration and acceleration lanes," he said.

For Noble, the goal is to have people drive at a steady 55 mph without slowing down. Those who wish to see wildlife can pull into the parking lots, which will be reached by using a deceleration lane and exited with an acceleration lane.

"In this particular stretch of road, there is not much space between the mountains and



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the water,” Noble said, acknowledging that the geographic features presented some limitations. For this reason, he added, the railroad tracks will be placed on a built up area in Turnagain Arm.

To complete the track realignment as currently planned, an estimated 1 to 2 million cubic yards of material will be needed. Potential local material sites are being identified, and there is a rock cut planned at Windy Corner.

Noble said the biggest benefit is the use of local materials. “Nearby material sites help keep transportation costs down,” he said.

No final decisions have been made and some fill will have to come from outside the area.

An audience member asked, “What will your material sites look like after they’re finished. They won’t look like the Bird Creek site will they?”

“We haven’t chosen the sites yet,” Noble responded. “We are still looking at it, and the final appearance is under consideration.”

How pedestrian facilities are used was another design consideration.

“We put the viewing area above the level of motor homes so it feels like you’re closer to the sheep,” said Bill Evans, a landscape architect working on the project.

Noble revealed some of the thinking behind the design. “We’re trying to provide a viewing area,” he said. “We’re trying to provide water access. And we’re trying to prevent railroad trespass. Pedestrians will be able to see out above the trains. The design presents a much more attractive way to get to the viewing areas.”

Regarding accessibility, he said, it is also a handicapped accessible walkway with a 5 percent slope.

Operations and maintenance of these amenities will require an operating agreement between Alaska DOT&PF, Dept. of Natural Resources, and Chugach State Park. Funds will have to be dedicated to run these new facilities.

Funding for the project through 2015 is currently coming from the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). The project’s current cost estimate is \$50 million, which will require a combination of state and federal funds for completion. The project is being prepared to meet federal requirements.

Noble emphasized the importance of public comments on the project and the outreach efforts that have been made. “The more public input we get on the project, the better it becomes,” he said. “The earlier we can get your comments the better. You can provide your comments online. Because this corridor impacts so many people regionally, we’re trying to reach out to a broader segment of the public.”

Information about the project, the design plan and a comment sheet can be found at <http://www.dowlhkm.com/projects/windycorner/meetings.html>. There is also a Facebook page.

The Windy Corner project will soon move into the plans, specifications, and estimates stage. By this summer, final plans will be drawn and the right-of-way acquisition process will begin. Construction is planned to begin in 2016 and last into 2017.