



MEMORANDUM

Presentation to Matanuska-Susitna Borough – Partnership Agreement

TO: Matanuska-Susitna Borough Assembly

FROM: Kelly Summers, PE, Project Manager, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities and Renee Whitesell, Consultant Project Manager, DOWL

DATE: February 25th, 2021

PROJECT: Parks Highway Alternative Corridor Planning & Environmental Linkages (PEL) Study
Project Numbers: Federal-0A41039/004210000 State-CFHwy00421/0A41039

Project Description

The State of Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) has identified the need for a future alternative highway corridor in the Wasilla area of the Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) Borough. Since the 1980s, studies have been completed but were unsuccessful in moving a project forward to project development. Due to sustained and relatively high population growth in the Mat-Su, increasing traffic volumes along the city's main corridor, the Parks Highway, creates significant traffic congestion during peak periods. Network improvements are needed, which will come with a wide variety of environmental resource, land use, and public involvement challenges.

To address these challenges, DOT&PF has chosen to use the Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) process to smooth the future National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. The project will build upon prior planning studies for the development of an alternate highway corridor that connects the Parks Highway between the Hyer Road Interchange and West Hawk Lane. The project study area boundaries, where the proposed alternative highway corridors will be located, is shown in Figure 1. The area is broadly bordered (+500-1000 feet) by the Parks Highway to the north, Hyer Road interchange to the east, West Hawk Lane to the west, and Palmer Slough to the south.

To support meaningful community and agency involvement in the PEL Study, a Technical Advisory Committee and Stakeholder Advisory Committee have been established. These Committees will meet periodically over the course of the PEL Study and will also be invited to provide reviews of technical memoranda and other documents prior to key public involvement events. In addition, four public open house meetings are planned to give the public an opportunity to be involved in the PEL Study, to provide comment at key project milestones, and to support an open dialogue around the PEL process and selection of alternative corridors.

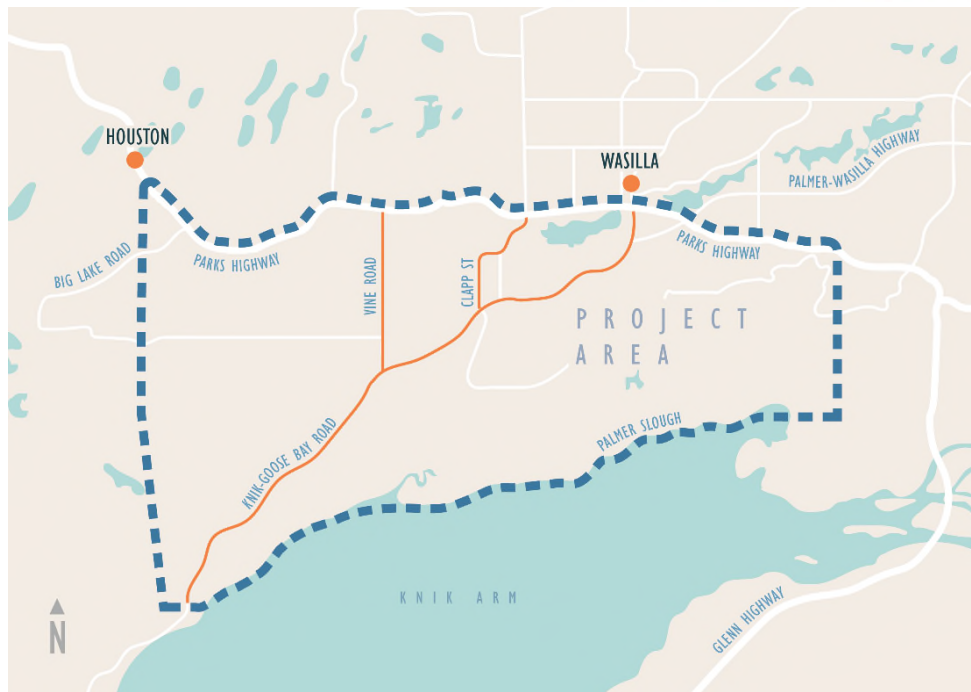


Figure 1: Probable Limits of the Alternatives

Matanuska-Susitna Borough Involvement/Partnership Agreement

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough has agreed to participate in the Technical Advisory Committee. The Borough's representatives are Mr. Brad Sworts (Pre-Design and Engineering), Mr. Eric Phillips (Community Development), Mr. Jason Ortiz (Planning and Land Use Director), and Mr. Adam Bradway (Planner). A kick-off meeting was held on October 28, 2021, which provided an overview of the PEL Study and introduced a partnership agreement for discussion and signature (refer to Attachment). The partnership agreement affirms a mutual commitment to participate in the Technical Advisory Committee, share information, provide opportunities to review and comment on draft planning materials prior to public review, communicating agency needs and priorities, work collaboratively with the intent to develop supportable planning products that can move into future NEPA project reviews, and use the work completed as part of the PEL Study to hasten the development of future projects that arise from the study.

The Partnership Agreement is non-binding. At the kick-off meeting Mr. Sworts requested that the project team present to the Assembly and request a resolution to enable the Partnership Agreement to be signed. To support this process, we have attached copy of the partnership agreement with a signature bar on behalf of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough to this memorandum. We look forward to talking with you at your Council meeting on Tuesday, March 8th, and will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Attachment: Parks Highway Alternative Corridor PEL Study Partnership Agreement.



AGENCY PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT

Purpose and Background

The State of Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) has identified the need for a future alternative highway corridor in the Wasilla area of the Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) Borough. Since the 1980s, studies have been completed but were unsuccessful in moving a project forward to project development. Due to sustained and relatively high population growth in the Mat-Su Valley, increasing traffic volumes along the city's main corridor, the Parks Highway, creates significant traffic congestion during peak periods. Network improvements are needed, which will come with a wide variety of environmental resource, land use, and public involvement challenges.

To address these challenges, DOT&PF has chosen to use the Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) process to smooth the future National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. The project will build upon prior planning studies for the development of an alternate highway corridor that connects the Parks Highway between the Hyer Road Interchange and West Hawk Lane.

DOT&PF intends to use the PEL Study to proactively consider the needs of interested agencies who have regulatory authority in the study area. This Partnership Agreement memorializes the understanding between DOT&PF and various agencies who are partnering to complete the PEL process, including the Matanuska-Susitna Borough and the City of Wasilla (collectively referred to as the "Parties").

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) defines the PEL process as a "collaborative and integrated approach to transportation decision making that considers benefits and impacts of proposed transportation system improvements to the environment, community, and economy during the transportation planning process." FHWA intends information and analyses developed during the transportation planning process to serve as the foundation for project decisions and to support and streamline subsequent environmental review and permitting under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other environmental regulations. Successfully integrating planning and environmental reviews requires early coordination and collaboration with local, state, and federal agencies with relevant knowledge and decision-making authority for resources within the study area.

Benefits

DOT&PF desires to provide safe, efficient transportation improvements that minimize impacts to the human and natural environment and valued resources within the study area. Implementation of the PEL process is expected to result in multiple process and outcome benefits for DOT&PF and its partners:



- **Early understanding of critical needs and issues**
A PEL approach enables transportation agencies to work collaboratively with partner agencies to identify sensitive resources, permitting obstacles, and potential fatal flaws that may hinder future project development. Identification of these issues during initial planning minimizes subsequent delays during project development.
- **Integration of planning products in NEPA reviews**
Federal regulations allow specific planning products to be used directly during the NEPA review process, eliminating duplicative efforts, streamlining project development, and accelerating project delivery. These products include purpose and need statements; identification of and preliminary screening of alternatives; elimination of unreasonable alternatives; a description of the environmental setting; measures to avoid, minimize, and mitigate impacts; and potential mitigation activities, locations, and investments.
- **Enhanced decision making**
Collaborative planning enhances dialogue and information sharing among partner agencies. The PEL process enables the DOT&PF to consider how partner needs, priorities, and legal obligations influence transportation project risks. This process facilitates informed transportation decisions ultimately leading to improved transportation outcomes.
- **Improved consistency in transportation improvements**
The PEL process facilitates holistic problem definition and identification of a shared vision for the entire study area. DOT&PF intends to identify an alternative corridor to the existing Parks Highway, which may be implemented using individual projects that work together to achieve common goals and objectives for the corridor, improving system efficiency, and providing enhanced justification for investment decisions.

Commitments

The Parties agree to support the Parks Highway Alternative Corridor PEL Study as follows:

1. The Parties agree to designate one or more representatives to participate in a Technical Advisory Committee. The committee will meet periodically during the PEL process to contribute to the development of the purpose and need, alternatives, evaluation of alternatives, review draft documentation, identify critical resources, and discuss and resolve issues and concerns.
2. The Parties agree to share relevant data with DOT&PF to assist in identifying important resources, corridor needs, and potential impact minimization/mitigation options.
3. DOT&PF will provide an opportunity for participating entities to review and comment on draft planning materials before publishing for public review. The Parties agree to provide timely feedback to DOT&PF in response to review requests.





- 4. The Parties agree to communicate agency needs and priorities to DOT&PF that would materially affect future transportation project decisions.
- 5. The Parties agree to work together collaboratively with the intent to develop supportable planning products for integration into future NEPA project reviews.
- 6. The Parties agree to use the work completed as part of the PEL Study as a mechanism to hasten the development of future projects that arise from the study.

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On Behalf of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough

Name:
Date:

