

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Project # CFHWY00421 / Federal # 0A41039  
May 2023



## 1. What is the Parks Highway Alternative Corridor PEL Study?

Due to sustained population growth in the Mat-Su Valley, congestion along the city's main corridor, the Parks Highway, creates significant traffic delays during peak periods. As a result, the Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities (DOT&PF) has identified the need for a future alternative highway corridor in the Wasilla area of the Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) Valley.

The DOT&PF has chosen to use the Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) study process to identify an alternative transportation corridor. The PEL process will smooth the future National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process and provide opportunities for public input and involvement.

## 2. What is a Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) Process?

Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) is a collaborative and integrated approach to transportation decision-making that:

- Considers environmental, community, and economic goals early in the transportation planning process
- Uses the information, analysis, and products during planning to inform the environmental review process<sup>1</sup>.

Footnotes:

1. [https://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/env\\_initiatives/PEL.aspx](https://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/env_initiatives/PEL.aspx)

## 3. What are the benefits of a PEL Process?

The benefits of stronger linkages between the transportation planning and NEPA/project development processes can include:

- **Improved project delivery timelines:** the PEL process can avoid duplication of effort and speed up project delivery.
- **Stronger agency and public relationships:** regulatory and resource agencies can get involved early and help shape projects. Collaborative working relationships with the public support more involvement and opportunities to contribute to project development.
- **Earlier identification of key environmental resources:** knowing which resources are present can help alternative selection and save time and money by moving forward alternatives that minimize impacts to environmental resources.
- **Better funding and project development information for programming funds:** engineering team involvement can help produce more reliable cost estimates, and more accurate environmental information helps determine NEPA classes of action.
- **Build projects with better outcomes:** environmental information and knowledge of agency and community concerns helps to design projects that better serve the community's needs.
- **Flexible approach that allows more holistic development of transportation improvement strategies:** The PEL Study can look at a broader scale corridor like the Parks Highway Alternative Corridor and propose solutions to develop it as a series of smaller independent, fundable projects that can be implemented over time while fitting within a larger or longer-term context<sup>2</sup>.

Footnotes:

2. DOT&PF Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) Guidebook [https://dot.alaska.gov/rfpdocs/25213030/pel\\_guidebook.pdf](https://dot.alaska.gov/rfpdocs/25213030/pel_guidebook.pdf)

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## 4. There have been studies in this area for over 40 years. What happened to those studies and why do a new one?

This PEL Study was preceded by several projects that sought to identify an alternative highway corridor to the Parks Highway in the vicinity of the City of Wasilla, dating back to the 1980's. Most recently, the Parks Highway Alternative Corridor Project Conceptual Planning Report (April 2015) explored options for relieving Parks Highway congestion through development of a Wasilla area bypass rather than through expansion of the existing Highway. The ten-year study, which included extensive public involvement, recommended six alternative corridor alignments for further evaluation. Since the completion of the Conceptual Planning Report, the population in the project area has continued to grow and further development has occurred. This PEL Study will provide a fresh evaluation of the existing conditions and issues, develop a clear project purpose and need, and identify alternatives that are able to be implemented to effectively permit and construct a Parks Highway Alternative Corridor.

## 5. What is the study area?

The project will plan for the development of an alternate highway corridor that connects to the Parks Highway between the Hyer Road Interchange and West Hawk Lane, which represents the maximum possible extent of the project. Areas north of the Parks Highway were eliminated from consideration due to a chain of lakes presenting environmental challenges.



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## 6. What is the PEL Schedule?

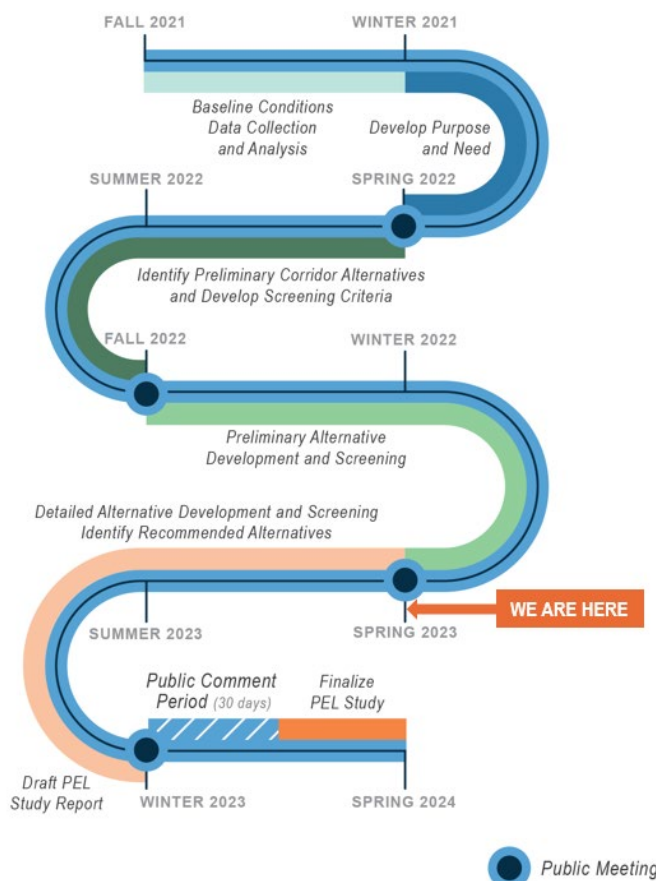
This study kicked off in Fall 2021 with baseline analysis and data collection and the first open house was held in March 2022 to discuss the emerging themes that would ultimately become the project's purpose and need.

In May 2022, members of the technical and stakeholder advisory groups participated in an alternatives development workshop where they developed preliminary alternative corridor alignments. The project team further refined those preliminary alternatives and presented them to the public, along with screening and evaluation criteria, at the second open house in December 2022.

Work continued after the second open house, to identify which alternatives will advance to detailed development. At the third open house, the project team will share the results of the screening process and recommendations for which alternatives should move into detailed development and screening.

Keeping stakeholder feedback in mind, the project team will continue to refine the routes through detailed alternative development and screening. They will identify recommended alternatives and make recommendations on how these alternatives could be implemented through one or more independent projects. The project team will also identify potential interchange locations to facilitate movement between the alternative corridor and the existing roadway network.

The recommended alternative corridor or corridors and potential projects will be presented to the public in Winter 2023/24 as a draft PEL study. Following the receipt of further public comments and input, the final study document will be published in Spring 2024.



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## 7. What is a Purpose and Need Statement?

One of the first major steps in the PEL process is to develop a purpose and need statement, which is a vision for the future project and supplies the basis for developing criteria for comparing and evaluating alternatives, developing a range of alternatives, and selecting a recommended alternative(s). The purpose and need statement must clearly and concisely describe the transportation project(s) and other needs without offering a specific solution. Instead, it supplies information that will help identify solutions to the identified problems(s). The “purpose” states why DOT&PF is proposing the study and outlines the positive outcomes they hope to achieve by proposing solutions through the PEL process. The “need” describes the key problem(s) the PEL process is addressing and explains the underlying causes of these problems.

## 8. What is the Purpose and Need Statement for this PEL study?

The purpose of the Parks Highway Alternative Corridor PEL study is to improve regional and local transportation through the Wasilla area of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough by identifying an alternative highway corridor that will improve safety for all transportation modes, reduce existing and future traffic congestion, and increase mobility. The study will seek to improve transportation for non-motorized users, respond to community values, and support or enhance economic, social, environmental and energy conditions.

### Needs

Through a collaborative process that balances multiple viewpoints of stakeholders, agencies, and the public, and working within regulatory requirements, DOT&PF determined that a successful solution should address the following needs:

- Improve safety in the corridor for vehicles, pedestrians, and bicyclists
- Decrease fatal and serious injury crashes
- Reduce existing traffic congestion and intersection delay on Parks Highway
- Add roadway capacity to meet projected transportation demand in the corridor
- Improve the roadway network to better separate local, regional, and through trips
- Improve efficiency for freight transport
- Improve multi-modal access and flexibility for all users
- Improve the durability of roadway improvements and ease maintenance operations

### Goals

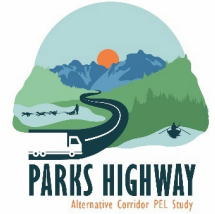
- Improvements should also meet these additional goals:
- Improve the efficiency of the local and regional transportation system for all its users
- Enhance and protect the public health and safety of travelers and the communities that transportation facilities traverse
- Improve existing natural environmental conditions when possible and avoid/minimize/mitigate adverse impacts to the natural environment
- Contribute to the improvement of the economy, social fabric, and quality of life along the Parks Highway corridor and in the greater Wasilla area
- Satisfy applicable federal, state, and local plans, policies, and regulations

## 9. How and when will public input be considered?

Public input will influence every step of the PEL process, and the recommendations of the PEL Study. This study outlines four Public Open House meetings:

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- Open House No. 1 – March 29, 2022
- Open House No. 2 – December 8, 2022
- Open House No. 3 – May 25, 2023. Please visit the project website, [www.parkshighwayalternative.com](http://www.parkshighwayalternative.com), to view presentation and meeting materials.
- Open House No. 4 – Winter 2023/24

In addition to the Public Open House meetings, the project team will accept comments throughout the PEL study process. The earlier input is received, the easier it is for the project team to incorporate into the alternatives, analysis, and recommendations. Email your comments to the project team at [parkshighwayalternative@dowl.com](mailto:parkshighwayalternative@dowl.com).

The environmental process will only be able to use the alternative analysis from the PEL study if the alternatives remain in substantial conformance with the PEL study recommendations. Any construction project that moves forward will also have substantial opportunity for additional public input and involvement during the environmental, design, and construction phases.

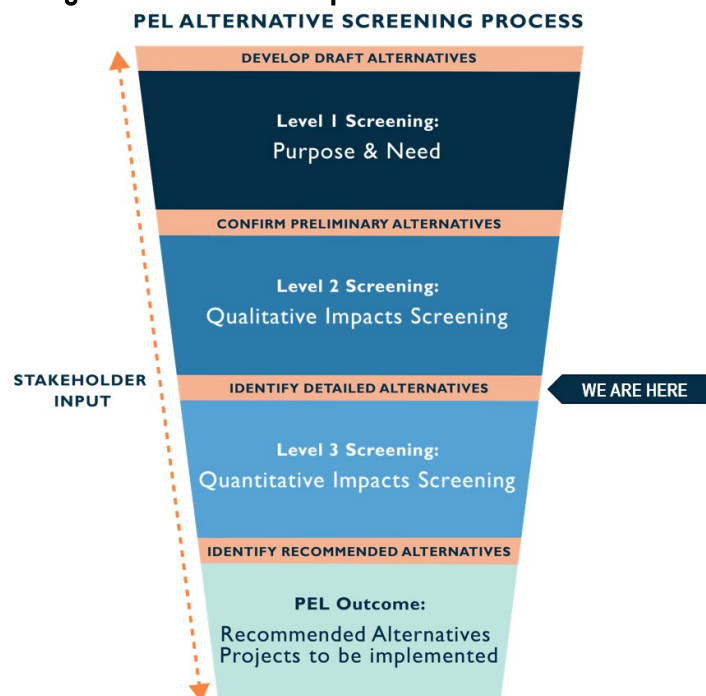
## 10. How can I find out more about and be involved in the PEL Study?

- Visit the project website at [www.parkshighwayalternative.com](http://www.parkshighwayalternative.com)
- Sign up to receive project update emails from the project website
- Contact the project team at [parkshighwayalternative@dowl.com](mailto:parkshighwayalternative@dowl.com)
- Participate in Public Meetings.

## 11. How is this PEL being funded?

This is a federally funded project led by the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF). The project team has **not** selected a recommended route at this time and **no** funds have been allocated for any right-of-way acquisition.

## 12. What are the Alternative Screening Criteria & Evaluation process?



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The alternative screening process can best be thought of as a funnel. Draft alternatives are first screened to determine whether they meet purpose and need in Level 1 screening. Alternatives that do not meet these criteria are eliminated or adjusted to mitigate impacts.

The project team has completed Level 2 screening, where preliminary alternatives are refined and evaluated qualitatively. The project team look at environmental and community resources affected, safety factors, transportation system performance measures, rough right-of-way cost, and feedback from the public during this process.

Next, the project team will conduct a more quantitative evaluation, looking at engineering feasibility, environmental, social, and economic impacts, roadway system performance, and more refined right-of-way and construction costs.

The outcome of this quantitative evaluation will be a recommended alternative or alternatives.

The no build alternative will be carried through each step of the screening process to provide a baseline for evaluation of potential impacts. The project team will continue to evaluate whether the alternatives meet the purpose and need and regulatory requirements all the way through this process.

## 13. How Many Preliminary Alternatives Were Considered?

The project team considered 10 Preliminary Alternatives:

- A No Build (or No Action) Alternative
- A Widen Existing Parks Highway Alternative
- Eight Alternative Corridors

## 14. How Many Preliminary Alternatives Are Recommended to Move Forward to Detailed Alternative Development?

Four (4) alternatives are recommended to move forward to detailed alternative development:

1. One alternative that combines the Dark Blue, Black Dashed (2015 Conceptual Planning), and Purple Routes
2. The Orange Route
3. The Yellow Route
4. The No Build Alternative

The No Build Alternative does not meet the Purpose and Need of the PEL Study, but is carried forward to the detailed alternative development step to provide a baseline against which to consider the impacts of the alternatives.

## 15. How is the Recommended Alternative(s) Identified?

The Detailed Alternative Development and Evaluation process will undertake further engineering and analysis of each of the routes moving forward with the goal of identifying one or more recommended routes. The process will seek to identify which routes deliver the greatest benefits for the least environmental, social, and economic impacts. The results of the Detailed Alternative Development process will be shared with the Draft PEL Study Report at the fourth, and final Open House in Winter 2023/24.



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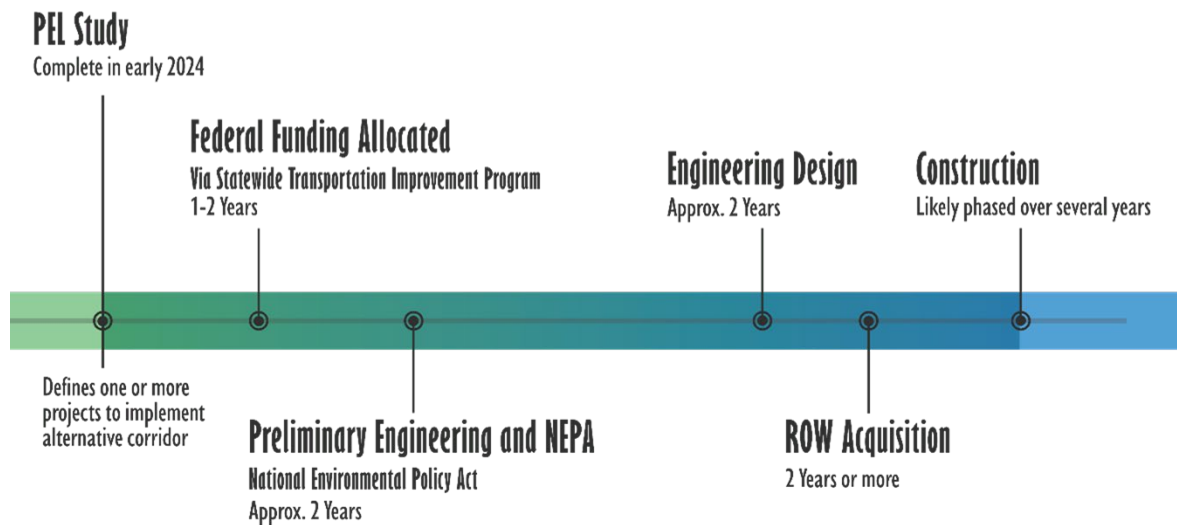
## 16. Why is the Knik Arm Crossing Not an Alternative?

Several members of the public have asked if the Knik Arm Crossing can be considered as an alternative in this PEL Study. The project team evaluated the Knik Arm Crossing and that it does not fulfil the project's Purpose and Need as it will not improve regional and local transportation along the Parks Highway through the Wasilla area of Mat-Su Borough. Based on the Matanuska-Susitna Borough's 2025 Long-Range Transportation Plan model runs, even if the Knik Arm Crossing were to be constructed, the Parks Highway entering Wasilla would still be at capacity and therefore the Crossing would not help to meet the PEL Study's Purpose and Need. Further, the modeling indicated that because the Crossing is located at the southern edge of the Study area, it would not have a strong impact on traffic along the Parks Highway Corridor generally in the vicinity of Wasilla. Further Information is available on the evaluation of the Knik Arm Crossing alternative is available on the project website under the Project Documents/Links tab.

## 17. What happens after the PEL Study?

The PEL Study will be complete in early 2024. Following its completion, several steps need to happen before an alternative corridor is constructed. These steps include:

- Allocation of Federal funding through the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program
- Preliminary Engineering and Environmental evaluation under the National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA
- Engineering Design
- Right-of-Way Acquisition



These steps are expected to take several years, and there will be many opportunities for the public to be part of the process.