

Overview

Between July 17, 2000 and October 13, 2000, Jamie Damon of Jeanne Lawson Associates, Inc. interviewed 20 agency and community stakeholders in the Anchorage, Seward, Coopers Landing, and Soldotna areas. Eighteen of the interviews took place in person either one-on-one or in small groups. One interview was conducted by phone and one interview was conducted via email. The purpose of the interviews was to gather input, guidance, advice, and concerns regarding how the ADOT&PF proceeds with the Sterling Highway MP 45-60 SEIS. While stakeholders shared their ideas, concerns, and questions about the alternatives that have been considered in the past, this summary focuses on the issues relating to process and ideas for how we move forward together in a collaborative way. Comments are not attributed to any one person interviewed. The summary is intended to be a compilation of all comments received during the interview time.

List of Stakeholders Interviewed

<i>NAME</i>	<i>TITLE</i>	<i>AFFILIATION, LOCATION</i>
Brian Anderson	Wildlife Biologist	U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Anchorage
Candace Beery	Land Manager	CIRI, Anchorage
Max Best	Planning Director	Kenai Peninsula Borough, Soldotna
John Czarnecki	Planner	Kenai Peninsula Borough, Soldotna
Christina Degernes	Superintendent	Division of Parks & Outdoor Recreation, Kenai Peninsula Area, Soldotna
Susan Fisler	Ranger	Division of Parks & Outdoor Recreation, Kenai Peninsula Area, Soldotna
Chuck Frey		U.S. Forest Service, Anchorage
Dean Hughes	Habitat Biologist	Dept. of Fish and Game, Habitat and Restoration Division, Soldotna
John Mohorcich	Resource Planner	Kenai Peninsula Borough, Soldotna
Phil North	Aquatic Resources	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Mona Painter	Chair, resident	Cooper Landing Community Club, Cooper Landing
Jim Richardson Pinky Richardson	Residents	Cooper Landing
Don Rivers	Engineering, Fire & Lands Staff Officer	U.S. Forest Service, Anchorage
Bill Schuster	Ranger, Biologist	U.S. Forest Service, Seward
George Siter	Business owner, resident	Cooper Landing
Doug Stockdale	Public Affairs Officer	U.S. Forest Service, Anchorage
Lance Trasky	Regional Supervisor	Department of Fish and Game, Anchorage
Ken Vaughn		U.S. Forest Service
Dodie Wilson	Chair, business owner, resident	Cooper Landing Advisory Council, Cooper Landing

Questions

The following questions were asked as a starting point with many follow up questions asked during the course of the interview.

1. What do you know about previous public/agency processes relating to this process?
2. How have you been involved?
3. What worked, what didn't work with the previous processes and/or other public/agency processes you have been involved with for the Kenai Peninsula area?
4. What would you like to see happen in this process?
5. How do people get information?
6. Ideas for engaging the communities and agencies.
7. Who else should be contacted early in the process?
8. Any other advice, guidance, comments, concerns?

Summary of Interviews

The summary is organized by topic and not necessarily by question. The comments have been paraphrased to capture the main points of the speaker. Comments that were repeated by more than one person are grouped together.

Working with Agency Stakeholders

Clarifying Roles

- All of the agencies need to retain independent decision-making authority.
- MOU development can get started now.
- ADOT&PF and agencies need to develop a “cost collection agreement”, the applicant is responsible for paying the agencies costs – this is outlined in the MOU.
- Need to clarify agency roles/responsibilities – MOU is a good tool to do this.
- Don't want to only participate as an enforcer. Regulatory agencies have valuable input earlier in the process than simply enforcing.
- Need a more collaborative attitude and approach from ADOT&PF.

Expectations, Comments and Concerns

- Need to develop a comprehensive accounting of the agency's issues to be addressed.
- The agencies walked away from the meeting earlier this year with a strong sense that ADOT&PF was going to pursue the Juneau Creek or Kenai River alternatives – we were not given the opportunity to be collaborative.
- Agencies cannot imagine that there are only two choices.
- The agencies have offered many suggestions and data on habitat, environmental issues, etc. and they question why that information has not been considered.
- Have not been able to put staffing resources behind this effort, would like to trust that this will go somewhere before assigning staff to track the process and be involved.
- Would like to put more resources into this, be a part of crafting alternatives.

- Involve the agencies early, agencies can be a tremendous resource to the ADOT&PF if the ADOT&PF uses them.
- Involve agencies early in discussing and crafting alternatives. We would like an opportunity to be creative and really work together with ADOT&PF.
- We need to be more cautious in this new process about how comments are taken into the process and addressed. Need to resolve issues early.
- 4(f) determination is tricky ground for this project. If there is a reasonable alternative to impacting parkland, then that alternative is chosen – cost cannot be the primary driver.
- This process is much more on the agency’s radar screen than in the 1990’s process. The new data available and environmental information, make the previous alternatives obsolete.
- ADOT&PF has done a good job of identifying the agencies and primary organizations that need to be involved.
- ADOT&PF comes out strong against a particular option too early, squelching creativity/agency involvement.
- There is a lack of trust that needs to be overcome both with the agencies and in the community.

Working with Community Stakeholders

Information Needs

- The ADOT&PF needs to engage the directly impacted community more regarding the challenges associated with fixing the road along the river.
- There is a lot of misinformation in the community, this needs to be straightened out.
- People don’t understand that the ADOT&PF is trying to upgrade the standards and why they need to do that.
- People need an opportunity to discuss and understand each other. Folks need genuine opportunities for asking clarifying questions.

Expectations/Concerns

- There is not widespread agreement in the community that there is a problem to be fixed.
- The community is having a hard time accepting the problem.
- Public safety is an important part of community criteria.
- Community is not in agreement that there is a road problem to solve. Many folks think that people simply drive too fast.
- This is a “highway without a constituency” the local legislative representative is in Soldotna and Palmer (those area roads are in good shape!)
- Be up front with the public.
- Need to establish a clear role for the community and community stakeholders.
- ADOT&PF needs to be clear on what the public is giving input on – their scope of authority.

How to Involve

- Town hall meetings work well, they give everyone an opportunity to participate.
- Open house style meetings work well in the community – use the community center.
- There are three groups of impacted community stakeholders: property owners, business owners, and recreation interests.

- The sun doesn't really come up in Cooper Landing in January. A lot of people head out of town. September, October, March, April, May, June are good months to engage locals.
- It is unclear to the community/ADOT&PF/agencies who is the official "community voice" – the advisory council? The community club? Both/neither?
- Don't like the idea of a citizens advisory committee – too exclusive. We need full community participation.
- Work one-on-one, develop relationships with key community members who have the trust and respect of others.
- Need to be a straight shooter – trustworthy.
- People want timely information.
- Folks want to have a real role in defining the outcome.
- The fishing community is not "joiners" – need to make a special effort to include.
- It will be difficult to get input from recreational users who are just passing through.
- Processes tend to work better with smaller groups.

Comments Regarding Previous Processes for Sterling Highway

Purpose and Need

- The existing road works well ten months out of the year, we expect more substantive data then during the last process as to why there is a problem to solve.
- We need more information about why ADOT&PF is doing this project.
- The problem is only two months out of the year. The public cost is too great to fix a seasonal problem.
- It seems as though just a couple of agencies (ADOT&PF, KPB, DNR) are pushing the project and everyone else who is impacted doesn't understand why.
- What is the driving force behind this project? Why does it continually crop up every 5 years or so?
- If speed and safety are the two main reasons for this project then double the fines in the area, post it as 35 mph, and get some law enforcement in there for the 2 months that it is a problem.
- Confused about what the ADOT&PF was doing with the draft EIS process in the 1990's. Forest Service was asked to choose a preferred alternative and they chose not to.

Comments and Concerns

- Process pieces and data pieces have been left out.
- What process?!?
- The public meetings were not organized well, need more community dialog/discussion.
- Need better drawings, maps and visuals. People are not clear how the alternatives will impact them. The lines on the map were not detailed enough.
- Want a different public process from last time and from how ADOT&PF has worked with the public in the past.
- Concerned that community does not feel heard, valued.
- The reason this has dragged on is mostly because of the ADOT&PF funding situation and the lack of a clear solution.

- ADOT&PF has been trying to resolve this problem since the mid 1970's, every time there is a bit of money appropriated they study it again – it could have been fixed by now. Tired of financing ADOT&PF work to continue to study the same problem for 30 years.
- The ADOT&PF has not been supportive of the community's information needs – no one has ever come and spent time with business owners and residents to get to know their concerns and provide detailed information about the alternatives.
- Did not feel that the ADOT&PF heard the issues that were raised and did not see them addressed in the process.
- The previous process worked okay. Everyone needs to be able to put in their two cents.

Alternatives Development

- The set of alternatives is incomplete. It is not an adequate array.
- Have not seen the ADOT&PF demonstrate what they are trying to accomplish.
- The community did not have a real role in developing and evaluating the previous alternatives.
- The reasons for dismissing ideas did not seem sound, or well researched.
- The alternatives did not address the wildlife/habitat issues.
- There wasn't the level of detail needed to properly evaluate the alternatives – no economic study, no historical inventory.
- Understood that the intent was to take an in depth look at the existing alignment, don't think that the ADOT&PF did that.
- Question the 20-year planning horizon.

Concerns Regarding the Alternatives Previously Under Consideration

3R

- The 3R has merits and should be analyzed in more detail in light of new data and technology.
- Don't understand why the ADOT&PF won't seriously consider the 3R.
- The 3R, as it currently stands, will dramatically impact businesses. The ADOT&PF has not been able to show the businesses the level of impact.
- The community needs to see a detailed map of the 3R.
- It appears that there are only a handful of pinch points to solve to fix the road along the river, we need to be creative about problem solving those areas before dismissing that alternative.
- The community has the wrong impression of what the 3R alternative is. People are against it because they think it will be a four lane, high-speed highway that will take out the community's homes and businesses – it doesn't have to be that way to solve the problems.
- Many community residents signed a petition against the 3R because they did not have a clear understanding of what it would be like. The ADOT&PF has done no damage control around the misinformation from the petition.
- The real problem is just from the post office in Cooper Landing to Cooper Creek. Fix that and much will be resolved.
- It is not uncommon for a section of road to slow down through a community, why spend so much money on the bench when only 1.5 miles of the existing section could stay at a slower speed.

Juneau Creek (JCA)

- We need to evaluate the cost/benefit better. The previous alternatives don't take into account how much public money will be spent to save a small amount of travel time. The JCA is a big ticket alternative for little benefit.
- There is a lot of misinformation regarding the alternatives, particularly the JCA: weather related hazards, speculative "development" plans along the route, where/how many access points there would be, and ADOT&PF's level of maintenance.
- First began looking at the JCA in early 80's because of the problems with cutting through the hill on the main alignment. Was told that the hill was unstable.
- The fog bank is a problem on the ridge. Much of the year the ridge is shrouded in fog.
- The overall impacts and bypass cost are too great for so little benefit in improved travel time and it does nothing to solve the current safety problems on the existing road.
- Who will benefit from the bypass? Will the landowners in the bypass area (DNR, KPB) be the ones to benefit at the public's expense?
- This alternative gets the highway off of the river, which is a good thing.
- People will still come to the community if the bypass is put in. People come because of the river.
- No access, no development along the bypass!! Keep the area preserved along the bypass route.
- It is a real problem to dump the traffic at Sportsman's Landing, this needs to be changed.

Kenai River Bridges

- In the early eighties, the "bridges" alternative came out as a "solution" from ADOT&PF. The agencies reacted strongly to it, and the ADOT&PF retrofitted a process to fit the solution.
- The bridges alternative is a red herring, it is not a real choice.
- The Kenai River alternative is a straw man.
- The "bridges" alternative was introduced to the community between 1978 and 1981, the community did not like it then, and they still don't like it.
- Very upset that this alternative has been "resurrected" – this was thrown out as not feasible a long time ago.
- Aspects of the Kenai River alternative "fix" segments along the current alignment that ADOT&PF said couldn't be fixed as a part of the 3R.

Design Speed

- The 65-mph design speed for the length of the project is unrealistic.
- Question the design speed the ADOT&PF is trying to meet. 35 mph in Cooper Landing seems reasonable, why design for such high speeds?
- Community does not accept the 65-mph design speed.
- All along the ADOT&PF has said the road needs to be designed to a 65-mph design speed – but the requirements have changed and the design speed needs to be lessened. It may open up some new alternatives.

Advice/Guidance for This Process

Linking Past to the Present

- This needs to be a new process, there is only so much we can use from the previous processes. There is significant new data particularly regarding habitat.
- Bridging the past and the present is going to be tricky.
- This process should be seen as a brand new approach, not a rehashing of the past.
- The “whole project” was supposed to be MP 35-60. MP 40-60 has not been evaluated as its own project in relation to MP 35-40. ADOT&PF needs to isolate this project, deal with it as its own process.
- ADOT&PF needs to look at this process in a different way than in the past – a “fresh start” is needed.
- It is difficult to do things differently – people have a hard time relinquishing power and supporting a collaborative process. The process can feel unclear and the outcome is unknown – this makes folks uncomfortable.

Problem Definition

- Focus on the need for this project. Don’t think community/agencies really understand what a future scenario could look like – level of service “F” for example, and why it is important to resolve the problem now.
- Need to understand and communicate the “whys” – why are we doing this at this time? Safety, Federal requirement, money in account now...etc.
- Need clear agreement on what we are trying to do.
- Need to do some more work on the reasons for this project – the reasons previously stated (safety, efficiency, industrial traffic off of river banks) are not well defined, not complete, and don’t have support/understanding of stakeholders.

Issues Gathering/Validation

- Validation of issues will be important –fill in the issues gaps since the mid 1990s.
- Identify the actual problem/set of problems from a community perspective.
- What are the issues we are trying to resolve? Need clarity.
- Constrain comments to pertinent issues.
- The list of issues needs to go to every household in Cooper Landing.
- Post the issues to make them available to everyone.

Criteria Development

- The NEPA document developed for this process needs to do a good job of outlining the tradeoffs and criteria used to arrive at a “preferred alternative” – don’t feel like this has been done well in the past.
- Everyone needs to know why an alternative is being dropped – they may not agree, but they need to have the information.
- Develop the tradeoffs with stakeholders, don’t simply tell them what they are.
- The selected alternative needs to clearly show how it best resolves the issues and best meets the criteria established.

- Community/agencies need to know why their ideas are dismissed – don't dismiss right away, something new could be created from the discussion.
- ADOT&PF needs to work with community/agencies to develop criteria and parameters.
- Need to demonstrate and develop a clear understanding of how the ADOT&PF will evaluate and make decisions.
- Alternatives cannot be thrown out too early simply based on cost, we need a complete set of criteria and evaluate all alternatives using that criteria.

Alternatives Development

- ADOT&PF should not begin the process by disclosing a “preferred alternative” it is too soon for that.
- Don't come to the process with answers come to the process with questions.
- It will be disappointing if the ADOT&PF comes to the table with a preferred alternative before the process is underway.
- Need to look at variants to the 3R. Something relating to the 3R should be on the table for consideration in this process.
- Let's look at all of the alternatives and work together to generate others – no evaluating, no judging. When we have all of the alternatives out on the table, then we can apply criteria to see which one works best.
- This process needs to include an opportunity to craft alternatives (even if the ideas come from an “ignorant base”) or it will not feel like an honest approach.
- Cooper Creek Crossing is a viable idea that needs to be considered. More creative alternatives need to be considered.
- Need more creative thinking, examples from other areas.
- There are new construction techniques available that were not available during the last process. How can we factor new technology into this discussion?
- The community needs to have the facts, all of the information needed to help develop alternatives and choose one.
- Would like to see more work done on the 3R Alternative, don't think enough was done to look at the existing alignment.
- Would like to see the 3R Alternative move forward and be honestly considered in this process.
- The brown bear issue has been fleshed out more since the 1990s, this and other new habitat information must be factored in.
- Concerned about the Kenai River Alternative being put back on the table, don't think that the issues that took it off the table a long time ago have changed.
- Something along the existing alignment needs to be evaluated in this process perhaps it is some combination of the 3R and the Kenai River?
- It will be disappointing if the ADOT&PF cannot provide a level of analysis that will satisfy why an alternative doesn't work. It isn't good enough for ADOT&PF to simply say something won't work.

Who to Involve

- Need to involve trucking interests.
- Need to involve the other communities whose traffic passes through this section of highway.

- The process needs to be made available on some level to folks in Anchorage, Soldotna, Homer – it is not just a Cooper Landing problem.
- Need higher level of involvement from within ADOT&PF and from the Governor's office – why is this a priority for the Governor?
- Need to include the regional interests: Soldotna, Kenai River, KRSMA.

Staffing

- Environmental/biological consultant staff needs to have strong local knowledge or we can waste a lot of time.
- Need a facilitator for the meetings. Record input/manage discussion.
- Use the best staff, the best technical resources available – let's do this right.
- Laurie has been helpful with the anthropological information.
- The facilitator tends to be seen as the leader – need to help people understand that everyone has a role in achieving a successful outcome.

Expectations

- ADOT&PF must be clear about what is open for comment and what is not and WHY.
- Need to start fresh, too much has changed – land status, habitat, traffic, and now there is Borough land in the mix.
- This process needs to include; I. Defining values, II. Outlining relative risks, III. Ranking the findings.
- We need to do more than frame the process as a “pick one of these two alternatives” people have not been happy with that approach.
- Unsure if this issue lends itself to a consensus building process, a lot depends on how ADOT&PF approaches it.
- Keep in mind that the most successful processes begin without preconceived notions.
- ADOT&PF needs to be open.
- Don't be in too much of a hurry – take the time to do it right.
- We all need a really good process a good experience will lead to a better outcome.

Information Needs and Management

- Make all of the information available to everyone – be honest, forthright and up front.
- Make sure the process includes a mechanism to bring new people up to speed at any time.
- Hold some agency meetings in Cooper's Landing to define problems, build relationships
- Need to be clear about where process is – what is happening.
- Make process more inclusive, more open (than in past processes), use small groups, lots of meetings.
- Need an up-to-date aerial photo with the current alignment and overlays of the right of ways needs for the 3R and other alternatives.
- People don't understand the right of way issues associated with the alternatives.
- Need daily, up-to-date, traffic counts, seasonal!

Issues to Address in the Selected Alternative

Environmental

- Habitat- particularly new data.
- The hillside slumping is a problem.
- The combination of the hillside and the river pose a hazard in trying to do something along the existing road.
- Concern about hazardous materials transport along the highway, particularly along the river.
- Brown bear study outcomes.
- The selected alternative should not impact fisheries at all.
- Hazardous material dumping.
- The river is so important to the area – the potential of a hazardous material spill would be devastating to the area.

Community

- Increase in traffic in Cooper Landing over the past few years.
- Don't want the speed increased in Cooper Landing.
- Need traffic enforcement – perhaps in the form of a trailer kiosk (“ you are now going 37-mph...”)
- All the community ever asked for back in 1973 was shoulders and a walking path to get kids, bikes, pedestrians off of the highway. If a bypass is put in it doesn't solve those problems on the existing road.
- Cooper Landing has a “pathway” but cars use it! It is not very safe. The community needs help in solving existing safety problems.

Safety

- There have been fatal accidents along the highway through the community.
- The existing road along the river is dangerous as it currently exists.
- Weather related hazards.
- Maintenance on existing road if bypass is built.
- Safety is huge! Crossing the highway on foot is impossible no matter where you try.

Recreation

- Trail impacts

Coordination Issues to be aware of

- USFS, USFWS and CIRI are engaged in active negotiations regarding land issues in the project area.
- There is sensitivity between Cooper Landing and the Borough who has overturned some recommendations by Cooper Landing Advisory Council. Borough is not seen as supportive of the community.
- There are two local folks up for election in November (state representatives.)
- The Kenai River Advisory Council favors the Juneau Creek Alternative because of the lesser impacts to the river (as compared to the other alternatives at the time.)

- Factor in the adopted land use plan for the area. Everyone needs to know what the plans are for the land.
- Look into 4(f) constraints sooner than later.
- The Cooper Landing Community Club fills the role of a “jurisdiction” managing emergency services, senior services, the library parks, etc.
- Cooper Landing Land Use Plan endorses the JCA.
- The “roadless initiative” could pose a significant problem in pursuing the JCA. This policy will be established before Clinton leaves office.
- CIRI favors the Juneau Creek Alternative at this time.

Outstanding Questions/Concerns

- This process has been fraught with false starts, how do we know that this is really moving forward?
- Frustrated that we are in yet another EIS stage.
- Is “notice of intent” still on the books? Will this project be established as an existing project? This may resolve the potential problems associated with the roadless initiative.

Other Area Processes that Worked Well

- About 10 years ago the USFS did a public process regarding the bark beetle epidemic that went well.
- Bark beetle process was a good example of a public process.
- A process in Moose Pass about selected burning worked well – all community folks were called and kept up to date.
- The local community was very involved in developing the river plan with help from KRMSA – the planning process worked well.
- State lands had a parallel process for developing a plan for the area that worked well (although the current Borough mayor is not supportive of segments of the plan.)
- The Kenai River Plan process worked well – a combination of open houses/workshops and focus groups.
- Cooper Landing Land Use Plan – intensive meeting schedule for a six-month period. Posted all meetings in advance, people knew what was going to be discussed. Notices were put in the paper.
- The Kenai River Watershed Forum is using a collaborative approach that is working well.
- The Community Rivers Planning Coalition is a good model for the communities to use.

Others to Involve

- Sherman “Red” Smith (Cooper Landing)
- Joyce Oleson, owner of the Shrew’s Nest (Cooper Landing)
- Bob Baldwin, Friend of Cooper Landing
- American Legion in Cooper Landing
- The 3 local churches in Cooper Landing.
- Seniors Group (Cooper Landing)
- Helen Gwynn – longtime Cooper Landing resident
- David Rhoades (Cooper Landing)

- Princess Lodge (Cooper Landing)
- Lyndon Transportation (trucking)
- Spenard Building Supply (trucking, Soldotna)
- Ed Martin (Cooper Landing)
- Will Troyer (Cooper Landing)
- Pearly Jones (Cooper Landing)
- George Siter II (owns Gwin's, Cooper Landing)
- Mayme Ohnemus (Cooper Landing)
- Debbie Carlson
- Dahl Homemakers (Cooper Landing)
- Sexy Senior Dumpster Group (Cooper Landing)
- Bill Stickwell, ADF&G Advisory Board
- Kenaitze Tribe: James Showalter and Rose Tepp
- Sport fishers
- Trucking interests
- Hiking groups
- Robert Ruffner, Director Kenai Watershed Forum

Information Dissemination

- Post Office (most Cooper Landing residents have P.O. Boxes)
- Churches
- Telephone tree
- Public notices in newspapers
- Clarion newspaper in Soldotna
- Community Club meetings
- Advisory Council meetings
- Kenai fair
- Seward Phoenix Log
- Daily News
- Scanner channel on cable TV (out of Seward)
- The Daily News has an "outdoor" section in the summer that is widely read by out of town recreational enthusiasts.
- Homer News
- Use the Borough mailing list
- Get newspaper articles: John Little Daily News reporter and Shauna and Doug Lashbaugh, reporters for the Clarion.
- Put information on the web.