

Draft Brief Statement of Purpose & Need

Background

The purpose of this memo is to document a brief statement of Purpose and Need for the West Susitna Access (WSA) Road Project (Project) consistent with Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) methodologies and standard transportation project practices. The “purpose” states why the Project is being proposed and states the intended positive results. The “need” describes the key problems the Project aims to address and explains the underlying causes of those problems. This memo is intended as a starting point for soliciting public and agency comments during scoping. The draft National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) document will flesh out and refine the purpose and need based on public and agency comments.

Purpose and Need

Purpose

The purpose of the Project is to provide a safe public road linkage from the existing highway system west to public lands owned by the State and Matanuska Susitna Borough (MSB). This improved access would allow for increased recreation, guiding and settlement opportunities and economic development of State and Borough resources including forestry, agriculture, minerals, and energy.

Need

The Project is driven by a lack of developed overland road access to state lands selected and planned for recreation, settlement, and economic/resource development. The state and local governments selected lands in the Project Study Area, and their adopted management plans have identified and planned for development of these opportunities. Absence of road access is a constraint to full utilization of these lands for their selected and planned purposes. Access and development of these lands is consistent with Article VIII, Section 5 of Alaska's Constitution which supports the development of infrastructure facilities and improvements to assure greater utilization, development, reclamation, and settlement of lands, and to assure fuller utilization and development of fisheries, wildlife, and waters. In furtherance of the Constitutional authorization, the Legislature created a DOT&PF purpose, in AS 19.05.125, to provide “a network of highways linking together cities and communities throughout the state (thereby contributing to the development of commerce and industry in the state, and aiding the extraction and utilization of its resources), and otherwise improve the economic and general welfare of the people of the state.” Similarly, Congress

recognized Alaska's underdeveloped road system and created an Alaska-specific authorization, in 23 USC 118(d), that federal-aid funds "may be expended for construction of access and development roads that will serve resource development, recreational, residential, commercial, industrial, or like purposes."

This Project seeks to realize these constitutional and statutory aspirations by improving access and encouraging the responsible use of these lands.

Need 1: Lack of overland public road access limits the use and enjoyment of lands selected and planned for recreation, including tourism, and settlement.

- **Recreation.** Currently the lack of public road access to this area limits the ability for the public to hunt, fish, hike and recreate in areas that were selected and planned by the State and Borough for these activities. Without improved access and associated recreational facilities, the ability for residents and visitors to use the land recreationally is cost prohibitive and difficult. Only the most experienced and seasoned remote travelers are able to safely access these remote locations. The challenges and expense of getting to these lands limits the ability of the general population to enjoy and recreate in the area.
- **Settlement.** Settlement is a planned use of selected areas as identified in approved Department of Natural Resources (DNR) area and management plans. Currently, state and borough lands selected for settlement, including existing platted subdivisions, which are only accessible by air or river travel or overland during winter months. Crossing the Susitna River is a major constraint to access. The challenges and expense of getting to the lands identified for settlement are constraints to those lands being settled and used as planned.

Need 2: Economic development of resources (forestry, minerals, agriculture, and energy) is constrained by the lack of overland road access.

Resource studies and management plans in the area indicate the presence of marketable timber, minerals, agricultural lands, and several energy sources, including renewables (reference list). A lack of road access west of the Susitna River and connecting to the current road network inhibits economic and resource development. The lack of access, especially across the Susitna River, creates a barrier to the development of natural resources in the Susitna Basin for in-state use and export. Currently, transportation to this resource-rich area is cost prohibitive and lacks efficient safe connectivity to major labor markets of MSB and Anchorage as well as to transportation networks and services that would make resource development economical.

References

Alaska Department of Natural Resources (ADNR)

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Alaska Renewables

2024 Phase 1 Projects. Accessed at <https://www.alaskarenewables.com/projects> on July 11, 2024.

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Matanuska Susitna Borough

2001 Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Component of the Asset Management Plan. Department of Community Development. Land Design North. June 2021.