



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

Department of Transportation and Public Facilities

OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER
John MacKinnon, Commissioner

PO Box 112500
Juneau, Alaska 99811-2500
Main: 907.465.3900
dot.alaska.gov

March 8, 2021

The Honorable Robert Sivertsen
Mayor, City of Ketchikan
34 Front Street
Ketchikan, Alaska 99901

Dear Mayor Sivertsen:

The department's inability to start work on the Tongass Highway paving project during the 2021 summer construction season is a shared concern. It is disappointing that this project's development has taken longer than any of us would like, but it's a situation often faced when federal dollars, right-of-way (ROW) acquisitions and public process are involved.

Over the last several years, DOT&PF project designers conducted public meetings and collaborated with Ketchikan residents to improve the Tongass Avenue corridor. Initially, a simple re-paving project was considered, but it soon became evident that numerous deficiencies required attention. Consequently, the project grew to incorporate those much-needed improvements, including minor lane reconfigurations, reconstructing all curbs and sidewalks, pedestrian crossing improvements, and signalization changes.

Where are we now? Design development is substantially complete, but there are still roughly 74 ROW tracts to acquire and 43 existing ROW encroachments to resolve. Before a federal-aid project goes to bid, we are required to complete all ROW acquisitions and clear all encroachments. Any involved property owner could delay the project again, and we have limited ability, except for condemnation, to force property owners to cooperate. Regardless, we have allocated staff to conduct the ROW work as a regional priority. That involves preparing the ROW acquisition documents, submitting them to the various property owners, and allowing them "reasonable time" to review and approve.

Fortunately, most of the acquisitions on this project are relatively simple and should not be controversial or excessively time-consuming. But the harsh reality of the situation is that our ROW process will not likely be concluded until the end of November 2021, no matter what level of resources we allocate for this process. Too late to begin any meaningful work in 2021.

The proposal to split the project up over two construction seasons would not eliminate the ROW challenges. A phased approach creates additional concerns; despite the potential to save some traffic-control costs, splitting the project would increase the project's overall cost and exceed available funding. It would require a wasteful reworking of some areas paved just one season

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prior. We also have concerns about quality if the roadway surface pavement and striping become a patchwork done over two construction seasons.

This particular roadway section can withstand another season of use, and a thin-lift overlay would use scarce state dollars and is not considered to be warranted. The expense is difficult to justify, considering we'd tear it up again the following year.

We are committed to making every effort to minimize the impacts on both local and tourism-related traffic. Your recommendations to mitigate traffic impacts in 2022 are well-founded and can be implemented on this project. Barring any further issues or delays, we anticipate awarding this project in time to utilize the spring shoulder season in 2022. The construction contract will likely require the most impactful work to occur outside of heavy traffic hours.

Had we seen COVID coming, we would have accelerated a number of projects throughout the state to take advantage of the greatly reduced traffic volumes. This happened quickly just a year ago, and working closely with the construction industry, it was a challenge to successfully complete our annual \$500 million statewide construction program. Work for hundreds of businesses and thousands of families helped offset the serious economic impacts we've experienced throughout the state.

Please be assured that we're prioritizing efforts to finish the remaining ROW work promptly. Southcoast Region engineering staff recently held a productive meeting with Public Works Director Mark Hilson and arranged for monthly meetings to keep communication lines open. With this spirit of cooperation, I'm sure we'll accomplish our shared goal of constructing a safer and more efficient traffic corridor for Ketchikan residents.

Sincerely,



John MacKinnon
Commissioner

Cc: The Honorable Mike Dunleavy, Governor, State of Alaska
The Honorable Bert Stedman, Alaska State Senate
The Honorable Dan Ortiz, Alaska House of Representatives
City of Ketchikan Councilmembers
Karl R. Amylon, City Manager
Lacey Simpson, Assistant City Manager
Mark Hilson, Acting Port & Harbors Director