

North Access: History and Background Information

The visitor facilities study is undeniably associated with the north access issue, which has been discussed and debated for years. Below is an abbreviated chronology of the north access issue.

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| 1917 | Mount McKinley National Park was established on February 26. In September, a group of Kantishna residents petitioned for a road to be built north of the park from the railroad at Lignite Creek to their district. |
| 1920 | After surveying both the Lignite route and the “Riley Creek route,” Hawley Sterling, an Alaska Road Commission engineer, recommended locating the park road (which also serves as the Kantishna access road) in its present-day location. |
| 1922-1938 | The park road was constructed to Kantishna by the Alaska Road Commission using monies appropriated by Congress to the National Park Service. |
| 1935-1970 | Earl Pilgrim developed the Stampede Mine for antimony production. He established an overland trail from Lignite to Stampede (the Stampede Trail) that he used in winter to haul sledges with 40 tons of antimony per trip. During the late 1940s he established a 4,600-foot airstrip at Stampede and flew out his antimony ore in 6-ton loads with Norsemen aircraft. Operations at the mine ceased in 1970. The Stampede Road was constructed in 1961 under the state’s Pioneer Road Program to support the transport of minerals from the Stampede Mine to the Alaska Railroad. Upon its completion, the road received no maintenance and degraded rapidly. |
| 1978 | Denali National Monument was established by Presidential Proclamation on December 1. This and other Alaska proclamations temporarily preserved areas during the legislative process to pass the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. |
| 1980 | The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) expanded the national park to the north to ensure the protection of wilderness and ecosystem values, giving specific mention to establishing sufficient habitat to sustain the park’s large mammal populations of moose, wolf, and caribou. Mount McKinley National Park, with its ANILCA additions, was renamed Denali National Park and Preserve. |
| 1986 | The <i>General Management Plan</i> for Denali National Park and Preserve recommended against construction of a new north access route. The <i>Wilderness Suitability Review</i> identified the north park additions as suitable for wilderness designation. |
| 1992 | The National Park Service assembled the Access Task Force, a group of senior National Park Service officials, to consider alternative access to Kantishna. The task force reviewed the existing situation and held local meetings to gather input. Among its recommendations, the report stated “there is no need for an additional gravel or paved road into the Kantishna area of Denali National Park and Preserve,” but further study of alternative transportation technology, such as railroads or a monorail, is warranted. |

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| <p>1993</p> | <p>The State of Alaska was given \$1.5 million to study and design a new road to McGrath with a spur road to Kantishna. The State Department of Transportation held public open houses and did preliminary investigations for the route; however, the study was halted because the anticipated increase in federal funding never materialized and the department’s program emphasis changed. Approximately \$250,000 was expended and the remainder of the funds returned.</p> <p>The <i>Alternative Transportation Modes Feasibility Study</i> investigated ways to improve access into the park. Both a road and railroad following the Stampede Road corridor were among its initial alternatives. The railroad option was eliminated prior to detailed assessment. The study concluded that a new road along the Stampede Road corridor “does not represent an effective investment for visitor access to Denali.”</p> |
| <p>1994</p> | <p>The Secretary of the Interior established the Denali Task Force to evaluate and make recommendations about transportation, Kantishna, and the south side of Denali. The task force did not reach a consensus on either a new northern road or rail system. The National Park System Advisory Board approved the overall report with an “amendment for endorsement of establishing a new northern railroad route contingent upon prior stakeholder agreements on the extent and nature of development in the immediate Wonder Lake area.”</p> |
| <p>1997</p> | <p>In response to Congressional direction, a <i>North Access Feasibility Study</i> was completed by the National Park Service and the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities. The study included an evaluation of the feasibility of two transportation modes, road and railroad, within the Stampede Road corridor. The study determined that standard construction practice for Interior and Arctic Alaska is sufficient to construct a road from the Parks Highway to the Kantishna/Wonder Lake area along the Stampede corridor, and neither terrain nor topography would preclude construction of a railroad. The study concluded that construction of a road or railroad would cost \$90 to \$250 million depending on the route and transportation method selected.</p> <p>The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) identified \$1.5 million for the State of Alaska to “construct a Denali North Access.” The intent of the TEA-21 language was later clarified to indicate that an environmental impact statement would need to be completed prior to construction of a north access route.</p> <p>The <i>Final Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan</i> was completed. Most of the area immediately surrounding Wonder Lake was designated a Backcountry Day Use Zone. Establishment of a new northern transportation route to Kantishna was an impact topic and alternative considered but not addressed in the plan.</p> |
| <p>2001</p> | <p>Congress reprogrammed National Park Service funds for a cooperative study with the State of Alaska to explore options for the location of campgrounds, trails, and other visitor facilities along the Stampede Road alignment, thus funding the North Access Visitor Facilities Study.</p> |

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| <p>2002</p> | <p>In January, the Alaska State Legislature overrode the Governor’s veto of HB 244 that provides for “a grant of state land to the Denali Borough for a railroad and utility corridor and a railroad development project” across state land in the Denali Borough.</p> <p>In March, the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) and the Denali Borough signed a Transfer of Responsibilities Agreement (TORA). With the TORA, the Denali Borough assumed the primary responsibility for completing the North Access Reconnaissance Study (NARS).</p> |
| <p>2003</p> | <p>In January, the Denali Borough conducted agency/public scoping meetings for the North Access Reconnaissance Study (NARS). The Phase 1 Report was completed in April.</p> <p>Governor Murkowski, in the State of the State Address in January 2003, stated, “we need a northern route into the 6-million-acre Denali National Park, the state’s number one tourist destination.”</p> <p>On March 12, 2003, the Denali Borough Assembly passed “a resolution expressing the need for the Denali Borough to wait for the results of the North Denali Access Study before proceeding with the provisions of HB 244.”</p> <p>The <i>Draft Backcountry Management Plan</i> identified Denali North Access as an issue and impact topic considered but not addressed: “Pending further decisions and actions on north access, the backcountry areas that might be affected by north access proposals need to be managed the same as the rest of the park additions.”</p> <p>In June, the National Park Service and Alaska Department of Natural Resources co-hosted public open houses to request comments for the North Access Visitor Facilities Study.</p> |
| <p>2004</p> | <p>In March, the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF) and the Denali Borough signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) that essentially nullified the 2002 TORA. Through the MOA, the DOTPF resumed primary responsibility for completing the North Access Reconnaissance Study with the Denali Borough serving in an advisory capacity.</p> <p>The Draft North Access Visitor Facilities Study was released for public comment in April. Public comments were reviewed and the study was finalized in August.</p> |

The information in the above table was derived from NPS and DNR management documents and archival information. Refer to the references for a listing of those documents.