

South Denali Consultation Committee Report and Recommendations (9/99)

Background

Context. The South Denali Consultation Committee recommendations contained in this report result from the February 1997 South Side Denali Development Concept Plan (DCP) and Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The DCP, initiated in May 1995, was developed and approved by a planning team representing the National Park Service, State of Alaska, Matanuska-Susitna Borough, Denali Borough, Ahtna, Inc., and Cook Inlet Region, Inc. Initial DCP concepts were based on recommendations of the Denali Task Force, a group appointed in 1994 by Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt at the urging of Governor Wally Hickel.

DCP Purpose, Vision, and Goals. The emphasis of the DCP is to provide resident and visitor facilities and services throughout the southside of the Alaska Range to meet a wide range of needs and interests of the region's diverse user groups. The DCP vision statement and accompanying goals may be found on Page 4 of the February 1997 DCP Summary and are attached to the report as Appendix A.

Creation of the South Denali Consultation Committee. Portions of the DCP remained controversial even after substantial plan modifications to address public concerns. As a result, the DCP recommended establishment of an implementation partnership to continue working on plan commitments and pursue additional issue resolution. A memorandum of understanding was signed in 1998 by the State of Alaska, National Park Service, Matanuska-Susitna Borough and Denali Borough, emphasizing a mutual desire and intention to continue working cooperatively to implement the plan. In addition, Governor Tony Knowles appointed the South Denali Consultation Committee to supplement, not replace, full public involvement during plan implementation. The primary purposes of the Consultation Committee include:

- Establish contacts the state can call upon to represent a broad range of interests to effect plan implementation;
- Enhance two-way information flow between the state and identified interests;
- Assist state agencies with effective outreach to affected and interested members of the public;
- Solicit and develop methods to address community values, and potential and perceived impacts during plan implementation.

The following excerpts from the Governor's correspondence setting up the Consultation Committee shed additional light on the role of the Committee.

From Governor's letter of invitation, November 10, 1997:

"It is my desire to bring together those with a stake in this plan to ensure the most responsive and sound project is implemented."

"The Consultation Committee is consistent with the final South Denali plan's commitment to include non agency interests in the implementation process. The committee is intended to maintain a constructive dialogue between state agencies and representative stakeholders."

From Governor's appointment letter, March 5, 1998

"I am hopeful, by bringing together people who have followed the southside planning process over the past several years, we can constructively address the implementation issues that have been raised."

Governor's Appointees to the South Denali Consultation Committee

Ms. Eleanor Huffines, Committee Chair
Alaska Wilderness Recreation and Tourism Association (AWRTA)

Mr. William (Bill) Devon
Trapper Creek Community Council

Mr. Cliff Eames
Alaska Center for the Environment

Mr. Chip Dennerlein
National Parks and Conservation Association (NPCA)

Mr. Darryl Jordan
Ahtna, Inc.

Mr. Dennis Brandon
Cook Inlet Region, Inc.

Mr. Max Lowe, Committee Vice-Chair
Alaska Snowmobile Representatives
Alliance (ASRA)

Mr. Toby Riddell
Mat-Su State Parks Citizens Advisory Board

Mr. Justin Ripley
Alaska Visitors Association

Ms. Roberta Sheldon
Talkeetna Community Council

Mr. Bill Welch
Mat-Su Borough Parks and Recreation Advisory Board

Ms. Carol Young
Yentna Mining District

Governor's Designated Non-Voting Liaison Participants

Mr. Austin Helmers
Trails and Recreational Access for Alaska (TRAAK) Citizens Advisory Board

Honorable Darcie K. Salmon
Mayor, Matanuska-Susitna Borough

DCP Facilities and Scope of Committee Work. Committee meetings began with agency briefings on the issues and proposals in the DCP. The approved DCP and its accompanying EIS represent and analyze the impacts of a maximum build-out, which includes a visitor center, campground, picnic area, public use cabins, and hiking trails in the Tokositna overlook area at the end of an upgraded and extended Petersville Road; a visitor center, expanded camping and trails along the George Parks Highway in the vicinity of Byers Lake; air-accessible camp sites, public use cabins, trails and information/safety signs at Chelatna Lake; and a trailhead providing access into Denali National Park and Preserve along the Dunkle Hills road (pending resolution of land status and access issues). Since the Tokositna element of the DCP was the most controversial, the Committee chose to focus its implementation recommendations on the Parks Highway and Petersville Road corridors, hence there are no recommendations at this time concerning Chelatna Lake or Dunkle Hills.

Minimum Requirements. At the outset of the Committee's work, State Parks Director Jim Stratton told the Committee there was little expectation that

the full build-out would go forward. "We feel that with the help of the Consultation Committee, we can identify a level of facility development that satisfies the concerns of most of the public, yet still meets the goals of the project" (July 27, 1998 Press Release). Mr. Stratton went on to identify the minimum requirements in the Tokositna vicinity to respond to current use trends and to protect state park resources: 1) trails, an environmental interpretive program, and some kind of shelter from bad weather; 2) a full-on view of Mt. McKinley; and 3) overnight camping (campground). State Parks and the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities also agreed that any necessary upgrade of the Petersville Road would be on a scale appropriate to the level of facility development.

Consultation Committee Activities. The Committee met as a full group on seven occasions: May 20, 1998; October 23, 1998; November 16, 1998; January 11, 1999; February 23-24, 1999; March 31, 1999; and September 13, 1999. Many members also maintained a dialogue throughout the process with each other, their constituents, interest groups, and staff. The Committee conducted three formal field trips: July 20, 1998 along the George Parks Highway; August 17, 1998 Tokositna hike; and August 28, 1999 Peters Hills/Long Point/Tokositna overflight. Many members also visited the area on their own throughout the process and during all seasons. Members of the public accompanied the Parks Highway and Tokositna hike-in trips. The Implementation Partnership Management Team (agencies that signed the Memorandum of Understanding) met in conjunction with committee meetings on November 11, 1998 and on January 12, 1999. In addition agency representatives regularly attended Committee meetings to provide briefings, answer questions, and observe the discussion.

Public Involvement. All Committee meetings were open to the public, advertised in advance, and were generally well attended. Each meeting incorporated two public comment periods, usually late morning and late afternoon. In addition, the Committee chair frequently recognized informal comment from members of the public during discussions. All public comment received was considered by the Committee.

Minority Views. Committee members often displayed a willingness to compromise their ideal vision to achieve common ground. While there was substantial agreement about many aspects of the Committee recommendations, a complete consensus was not always possible. Unless minority views are stated, the full Committee concurred with these recommendations. Where substantial disagreement remained, this report recognizes the minority views.

Next Steps and Future Public Involvement. These recommendations, submitted to the Governor, conclude the work of this Consultation Committee. The Governor is expected to forward the recommendations to the Implementation Partnership Management Team for consideration. Proposals subsequently pursued by the Implementation Partnership Management team will be subject to full public involvement and additional NEPA compliance, including an Environmental Assessment (for minor activities), or Environmental Impact Statement (for major actions) with opportunities for public comment in meetings and in writing. In addition, agency commitments made in the DCP will be adhered to by the Implementation Partnership Management Team. From Page 5 of the DCP summary: “Additional or revised land management plans and controls will be in effect before major development occurs.” The Committee defined major development as any new facility development or new road construction beyond the Fork’s Roadhouse. And from Page 14 of the DCP summary: “Studies on the natural and cultural resources and human uses of the planning area will be conducted in advance of southside development as appropriate.”

Appendix A: South Side Denali Development Concept Plan (Feb. 1997)

The Vision: The South Side Denali Development Concept Plan calls for a range of recreational opportunities and visitor facilities on the south side of the Alaska Range to address diverse visitor desires and needs. The plan is guided by the following vision:

- Provide opportunities for high quality, resource-based destination experiences and information, orientation, and recreation services and facilities convenient to park visitors.
- Develop facilities and access in a location and manner that minimizes impacts on resources, local lifestyles, and communities.
- Establish working partnerships for funding and phasing development.

Goals for the South Side:

- Provide access to and a location for interpretation of the special qualities found in Denali National Park and Preserve and Denali State Park, including access to the spectacular alpine landscape on the south side of the Alaska Range.
- Offer a range of experiences and opportunities to meet the diverse needs of the traveling public, including information and orientation to the region; new or improved recreation facilities; enhanced state and national park interpretation; and shelter in bad weather.
- Ensure that, viewed as a whole, facilities and services benefit all visitors, including Alaska residents, independent travelers, and package tour travelers.
- Design and develop facilities and access improvements to support public use and understanding of the south side and its outstanding resources.
- Establish a research program and identify management needs to guide facility and road development.
- Facilitate orderly economic development in the region consistent with resource protection.
- Minimize and mitigate adverse effects on fish and wildlife, habitat, cultural resources local rural quality of life, and existing public land and resource uses, including subsistence.
- Establish methods, responsibilities, and necessary steps to control unwanted secondary impacts of tourism and to minimize conflicts between different visitor groups.

September 1999 Final Recommendations

The following recommendations adhere to the goals of the Southside Denali Development Concept Plan (DCP) but depart somewhat from the DCP's preferred alternative. The recommendations utilize geographic nodes to specifically address questions of function, scale, and diversity of opportunities in the region. Public involvement, both written and oral, affected the outcome.

The recommendations identify the maximum allowable build out and emphasize the importance of linking stewardship and management. While development at the end of the Petersville Road continued to be a controversial topic, the Committee did narrow the scope of debate. The success of the recommendations will depend on continued public involvement and the Implementation Partnership Management Team's adherence to promises outlined in the DCP.

George Parks Highway

- Visitor Center at Chulitna Bluff to include but not limited to the following:
 - Staff-assisted interpretation
 - Enclosed heated space with indoor plumbing/water
 - Alaska Natural History Association (ANHA)-operated sale of interpretive materials
 - Full vehicle access and parking but no RV hook ups
 - Sheltered and no sheltered picnic areas
 - Short interpretive trails with access to river
 - Possible bear viewing dependent on sensitivity of local population
 - No overnight camping (camping is at Byers lake)
 - Administrative facilitates and maintenance station
 - Year round as determined by demand and resources
 - In the future, location for permit system

The Committee considered the Denali View South overlook as an alternative to the Chulitna Bluff site. The site was not favored by the Committee because of the proximity to private and borough lands where spin off development would be difficult to control.

- Byers Lake Campground
 - Upgrade existing campsites and facilities at Byers Lake
 - In conjunction with, or after upgrade, expand number of campsites
 - Where possible separate walk in tent sites and RV sites
 - Finish Byers Lake dump station to service the RVs
- Parks Highway
 - Improve existing pull outs

Improve the views along the highway with increased vegetative management

- Backcountry cabins and huts off the highway
 - Follow the existing Denali State Park plan for public use cabins
 - Preferably concentrate cabins and locate relatively close to the road

Petersville Road Orientation/Contact Station

- Location at junction of Parks Highway and Petersville Road
 - Consider the Scotty Lake site outlined in the Petersville Road Corridor Plan
- Simple indoor area designed to provide basic information
- Education and information to include but not limited to: Leave No Trace, land ownership, campground availability, weather, mountain viewing, road conditions, parking and shuttle info, brochures on local points of interest and businesses, etc.
- Site could be operated cooperatively by public and private entities.
- Not an interpretive "visitor center"

Petersville Road to Forks Roadhouse

- Follow the Petersville Road Corridor Management Plan, including site locations for pull outs, interpretation, waste disposal, litter and other community interests/concerns
- Examine cumulative impacts as well as the state's fiscal resources when determining the number of pull outs to be designated
- Continue community involvement with the implementation of the Corridor Plan
- Kroto Creek is an important place to begin efforts with improved parking and waste management.
- Pave the road to the campground/parking/operations area; then shift to a lower standard with chip seal or equivalent surface to the nature center access road.

Campground along Petersville Road somewhere between Forks Roadhouse and Petersville

- General vicinity of Deep Creek (either side of the creek) a possibility; exact location to be determined collectively by managing agencies and community
- Picnic tables, water, fire rings, and vault (or chemical) toilets.
- 50 sites maximum. This campground should be smaller than Byers
- Opportunities to separate tent campers, walk-ins, and RVs.
- No showers or RV hook ups (RV dump station is located on Highway))
- Campfire ring/amphitheater or bench site for evening programs
- Short interpretive nature trail
- Campground facilities could reasonably be "phased" here if needed without the danger of development creep

Operations and Maintenance Headquarters

- Consolidate facilities near campground
- Local ranger operations and research support
- Include necessary road maintenance facilities

Nature Center

A: The Preferred Alternative: Peters Hills

The Peters Hills nature center alternative was an attempt by the Committee to identify a location within the Denali State Park boundary that would avoid an extensive upgrade of the Petersville Road through the canyon, and minimize impacts to mining and backcountry uses.

If the criteria outlined in this Peters Hills recommendation can not be met upon further evaluation, the majority of the Committee recommends that the Implementation Partnership Management Team return to the original location at the Tokositna overlook to meet the goals of the DCP. In the event this is necessary, many of the characteristics and functions of the Peters Hills recommendation remain the same, but the access changes.

Summer Day Use and Shuttle Parking

- Near campground
- Those wishing to visit the nature center at Peters Hills must leave their personal vehicle here
- All other local traffic on Petersville Road unrestricted

Restricted Access Road to Nature Center (not Petersville Road)

- Narrow, gated road taking off from the general vicinity of the existing "55 Ways" trailhead leading up to a nature center
- Access would be restricted to service vehicles and shuttle or commercially permitted vehicles not to exceed a certain (not yet specified) size, design
- Traffic would not exceed a certain (not yet specified) volume
- Use tailored "park road" standards (narrow, winding) rather than standards for unrestricted public roads; minimize cuts and fills
- Limit design size of shuttle service drop off/pick up; no parking Lot
- Accommodate people who choose to walk or ride bicycles

Peters Hills Nature Center

Location criteria:

- Full view of Mt. McKinley and upper Tokositna valley
- Access to tundra
- Minimal distance from Petersville Road to achieve purposes
- Screened from view from valleys to the southwest, south, and east

- Inside state park boundary to avoid conflicts with existing and potential mining claims as well as existing uses.

The exact development site is purposely not mentioned to allow the detailed ground work to be completed by the Implementation Partnership Management Team. The above parameters outline a framework for the agencies while allowing the flexibility to choose the best site and access to protect both the resources and the needs of the people dependent on the resources.

Characteristics/Functions:

- Intimate feel; not for entertainment
- Unobtrusive; not an architectural landmark
- Designed for local information and interpretation, including opportunities for indoor/outdoor ranger interpretive talks (interpretation should include existing and historic mining)
- Less than 5,000 square ft overall including decking but not including hardened trails
- Building design should lead the visitor outside into the environment
- Rustic quality using natural materials that blend with landscape
- Protection from the weather including heating capabilities
- Vaulted toilets
- Accessible to all users
- No food service, lodging, or commercial sales
- Alaska Natural History Association (ANHA)-operated sale of interpretive materials (if ANHA is unavailable, then minimal sale of interpretive materials only)
- Short interpretive trails
- Longer primitive trail to Long Point and perhaps other points
- Benches to sit and enjoy the view for those unable to walk
- No hardening of backcountry campsites in the area until use pattern emerges. State Parks and NPS are responsible for determining the needs and impacts of establishing backcountry walking and camping
- Assess and define desired carrying capacity; the capacity discussion needs to include consideration of private and commercial allocations
- NO additional phases; this is the maximum in perpetuity

The Framework for Resource and Human Use Studies, completed on behalf of the Implementation Partnership Management Team by Gordon Olson, NPS, identifies the importance of determining the existing and potential use levels in the area. While difficult, this research is critical to the long term viability of the region.

Minority View: The Peters Hills nature center continued to be a controversial topic within the Committee. Four members were unable to support this level of

development beyond the campground. A number of the minority views are addressed in the Comprehensive Points Critical to the Recommendations section. However, there was concern that the state's political climate and financial realities would preclude the success of the planning, research, monitoring, and enforcement efforts necessary to successfully implement this portion of the DCP. Secondly, no matter how much care and sensitivity may be taken in implementing the Committee's recommendations, the full Committee recognizes that any development in the Peters Hills or Tokositna area would alter the character of these locations as they exist today.

The minority concerns include but are not limited to the following:

- Impacts to local communities
- Impacts to local wildlife populations and natural resources
- Potential loss of mining opportunities and/or greater restrictions on local mining operations is unacceptable to the mining community, and would be considered a "taking"
- Development scale caters to large scale tourism rather than independent travelers; the scale is inappropriate for the backcountry
- There has been significant public opposition, including petitions, to development at the end of the Petersville Road
- There is no current articulation or definition for desired visitor numbers
- Existing users will be displaced and there is greater potential for more user conflicts (for example, hunters and tourists and/or miners and tourists)
- Management of off-road vehicles and snowmobile use is not adequately addressed on general state land
- Cumulative impacts have not been adequately addressed

B. Tokositna Overlook Alternative

Tokositna Overlook Nature Center

Location criteria:

- Full view of Mt. McKinley and upper Tokositna valley
- Access to tundra
- Minimal distance from Petersville Road to achieve purposes
- Inside state park boundary to avoid conflicts with existing and potential mining claims as well as existing uses
- Existing conflict with the mining claim block within the state park boundary must be resolved prior to commitment to the Tokositna site

Characteristics/Functions:

- Intimate feel; not for entertainment
- Unobtrusive; not an architectural landmark

- Designed for local information and interpretation, including opportunities for indoor/outdoor ranger interpretive talks (interpretation should include existing and historic mining)
- Less than 5,000 square ft overall including decking, but not including hardened trails
- Building design should lead the visitor outside into the environment
- Rustic quality using natural materials that blend with landscape
- Protection from the weather including heating capabilities
- Vaulted toilets
- Accessible to all users
- No food service, lodging, or commercial sales
- Alaska Natural History Association (ANHA)-operated sale of interpretive materials (if ANHA is unavailable, then minimal sale of interpretive materials only)
- Short interpretive trails
- Longer primitive trail to access Denali National Park
- Benches to sit and enjoy the view for those unable to walk
- No hardening of backcountry campsites in the area until use pattern emerges. State Parks and NPS are responsible for determining the needs and impacts of establishing backcountry walking and camping
- Assess and define desired carrying capacity; the capacity discussion needs to include consideration of private and commercial allocations.
- NO additional phases; this is the maximum in perpetuity

Petersville Road

- Any necessary extension and upgrade of the Petersville Road should be on a scale appropriate to the level of facility development.
- A lower standard with chip seal or equivalent surface to the nature center
- There will be no restrictions on the Petersville Road

Restricted Access Road to Nature Center (not Petersville Road)

- Narrow, gated road taking off from the general vicinity of the Denali State Park boundary leading up to a nature center
- Access would be restricted to service vehicles and shuttle or commercially permitted vehicles not to exceed a certain (not yet specified) size, design
- Traffic would not exceed a certain (not yet specified) volume
- Use tailored "park road" standards (narrow, winding) rather than standards for unrestricted public roads; minimize cuts and fills
- Limit design size of shuttle service drop off/pick up; no parking lot
- Accommodate people who choose to walk or ride bicycles

Minority View For the reasons outlined in the Peters Hills nature center alternative, four members were unable to support this level of development beyond the campground.

Comprehensive Points Critical to Recommendations

Planning (dependent on available resources and prioritization):

- Complete NPS backcountry management plan
- Revisit the 1989 Denali State Park Master Plan
- Complete a Mat-Su/ State coordinated winter management plan
- Continue to support the implementation of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough Petersville Road Corridor Management Plan
- State Parks and Division of Mining, Land, and Water need to enter into a cooperative management arrangement for the important general state land near the new nature center, specifically the northwest side of Long Ridge and the lower lakes area (sample cooperative agreements include Hatcher Pass and Willow Creek)
- Planning efforts need to consider all seasons: summer, winter, and shoulder
- Complete a Parks Highway corridor management plan

Management and Resource Protection:

- Follow through on the Framework for Resource and Human Use Studies, completed on behalf of the Implementation Partnership Management Team by Gordon Olson, NPS (the research includes but is not limited to wildlife studies, fisheries studies, and recreational use levels)
- Complete some rendition of a limits of acceptable change process to address the carrying capacity question for both the nature center, the surrounding backcountry, and Byers Lake/Chulitna Bluff; the process should establish baseline standards and indicators
- Cooperative efforts to monitor resources
- Cooperative management of facilities
- Insure protection of scenic values across state lands along the Petersville Road
- No state land exchanges or leases that would be inconsistent with the desired natural character of the area; one exception would be a transfer of borough land in the Petersville corridor to the state, to be retained in public ownership
- Promote a Leave No Trace education

Operations and Maintenance

- Insure that sufficient operations, resource protection, and maintenance funds are available prior to facility construction

Additional Community Concerns:

- Cooperatively address the potential conflicts among existing uses, in particular, mining, tourism, hunting, snowmobiling, dog mushing, off-road vehicles, and quiet recreation
- Cooperatively address local concerns of traffic and vandalism
- Cooperatively look at enforcement strategies

(End)