

Airlift frees old bus from tragic past, offers positive future

By Corri A. Feige

For decades, the 1940s-era city bus abandoned on a remote trail 25 miles west of Healy has served variously as shelter, symbol, shrine, siren song, and even a place of death. Thursday marked the start of a new chapter in the life of Bus 142.

On June 18, at the request of the Alaska Department of Natural Resources (DNR), a Alaska Army National Guard CH-47 Chinook helicopter removed the so-called "Into the Wild" bus from the Stampede Trail so it could be transferred to safe, secure storage while DNR considers the next step in the story of Alaska's most famous bus.

After its service with the Fairbanks City Transit System ended in the 1950s, the Yutan Construction Co. bought the now-famous bus to house employees during construction of a pioneer road between Lignite and Stampede. It was abandoned upon completion of the road in 1961, and began quietly rusting away in a small clearing on the state-owned Stampede Trail, west of the Parks Highway.

Used by hunters and hikers as an occasional emergency shelter, the bus became famous after Jon Krakauer's 1996 book "Into the Wild" and a 2007 movie of the book popularized the story of 24-year-old wanderer Chris McCandless, who, sadly, died there alone in 1992 after a 114-day stay which he characterized in a journal as an escape from the constraints of civilization.

Since McCandless' death, increasing numbers of travelers have tried literally to retrace McCandless' steps, hiking a rugged trail in often-harsh weather and fording the Teklanika and Savage rivers to reach the bus site.

While many of them have had satisfying, if uneventful, experiences, too many became lost or injured, or required rescue. Tragically, since 2010 two women have drowned during such trips, fueling public calls to reduce or eliminate the hazards.

As the bus is a long-term abandoned vehicle present on state land managed by DNR, it is technically state property, and legally the responsibility of my department. However, determining what to do with the bus has required the balancing of interests.

On the one hand, Alaska welcomes residents and visitors for whom the real challenges and risks of recreating in our wild areas heighten their enjoyment. On the other hand, this bus had been attracting far too many visitors unprepared for the rigors of the challenge. They were risking harm to themselves or others, requiring search and rescue teams to put themselves in harm's way, consuming limited public resources, and in some cases losing their lives.

Some voices have called for eliminating the attraction entirely by destroying the bus. Others wanted to make access safer by building bridges or improving trails. Some

wanted to capitalize on its mystique, moving it to the road system as a tourist attraction. Still others wanted to see it preserved as a shrine to the kind of rugged individualism that shuns civilization's strictures.

In the end, DNR's decision to move the bus was based on a few essential factors. First, it had become an attractive nuisance posing unacceptable risk to visitors too often unprepared for the rigors of the journey. Second, the Alaska Army National Guard graciously agreed to remove it as a way to practice its skills at rapid air-mobile movement of equipment under wilderness conditions. Third, the bus was imposing financial burdens on the Denali Borough, Alaska State Troopers, DNR and other agencies. Finally, and most importantly, we simply could not ignore that the bus was a factor in more, and more frequent, injuries, accidents and deaths.

Recognizing news about the bus might reopen old wounds in the families of those who had died – and balancing that with a need to preserve the safety and integrity of the operation – as soon as the bus was on the move, I personally reached out and spoke with a member of the McCandless family to share the news, and to express my hope this action might save others from the kind of pain their families have experienced. Where time differences would have meant disturbing late-night phone calls to other survivors, my staff provided advance notice by email, and invitations to call back when convenient.

As Bus 142 will likely remain a potent symbol and attractive artifact, DNR plans to keep it safe in secure storage while considering options for its long-term future, in Alaska. While we will continue to consider public input, it is my strong intent to prevent the bus and its legacy from being exploited for publicity, profiteering or any other disrespectful use. Decisions on its final disposition will reflect our responsibility for the health, safety and well-being of our residents, our visitors, and our land and resources.

Bus 142 has had a long and fascinating past. By respectfully, efficiently and safely moving it, we are preserving the opportunity for this piece of history to have a long-term future as well; not only in Alaska, but also in the hearts, minds and memories of adventurers and seekers around the world.

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