Borough Finalizing Plans for North Road Extension

About two decades after the Kenai Peninsula Borough first got federal funding to extend the Kenai Spur Highway northward, the borough is working on finalizing plans for the long-awaited road.

Many property owners in the remote subdivisions of Gray Cliffs and Moose Point, north of Nikiski, have been waiting for the road to reach their parcels since 1998, when the borough first received a grant from the federal government to extend the highway past its current terminus at Captain Cook State Park. At the time, the permitting requirements and the cost of the environmental impact statement would have consumed the entire approximately $6 million grant, so the borough abandoned the effort.

However, the road extension plan got new life when Apache Corporation began exploring for oil in the area. In 2014, the corporation announced plans to extend the road out to a pad about 7 miles past the current terminus and began completing environmental work. But the future of the extension became unclear when Apache suddenly announced its withdrawal from exploration in Alaska in March 2016, in part due to low oil prices.

Borough Mayor Mike Navarre’s administration began talks with the company for a possible donation of the environmental work, applying the documents as an in-kind match for the required 20 percent contribution to access the 1998 federal grant. It worked, and the borough has been able to move forward with the project without contributing an extra cent. Once the extension is finished, though, it will be part of the borough’s Road Service Area and up to the borough to maintain.

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Construction season under way on the Kenai Peninsula

North Road extension project to go out to bid in fall

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“This is one of those cases where everything just lined up really well,” said Henry Knackstedt, the borough’s road engineer who is heading up the North Road Extension project, at a public meeting Thursday in Nikiski.

Knackstedt said the project will likely go out to bid in the fall with a two-year contract, pending a permit from the Army Corps of Engineers, the finalization of the categorial exclusion from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the completion of the design. The plan right now is to maximize the money available without spending borough funds — with tight budgets, the borough just completed a tense budget process for fiscal year 2018 — and so the designers have come up with a base bid and two additional extensions, if funding allows, he said.

The plan is to make the road about 18 feet wide, slightly less than the current road standard elsewhere in the borough, but still wide enough for two cars to pass. The hope is to get more road length without having as much of an impact on the wetlands, Knackstedt said.

The base bid would reach just over Leif’s Creek, about 4 miles past the current terminus, and would include a turnaround and pullouts. The first extension past that would go about another 2.5 miles, and the third would reach Otter Creek, about 8 miles out.

The largest cost of the project is in the approximately 130,000 cubic yards of gravel necessary to build the road, Knackstedt said. As its name implies, Gray Cliffs is mostly silt, so there’s very little material available out there for nearby sourcing. Moving gravel out into the area is expensive, as it’s a pioneer road and the contractor will have to build the road out as they go to haul gravel along it.

“The gravel is probably the single most important portion of this project,” he said. “There’s clearing, there’s culverting, there’s fish passage … the big dollar item, the main item is the gravel.”

The current plan is to seek private gravel pits to purchase from. The borough has a material site at approximately mile 32, but the material is not proven and the road access is not sufficient for heavy equipment access, Knackstedt said. To be a good source site, it would need improvement, which costs money, and he said he preferred to go to the open market and include the private gravel pits nearby.

In addition to the road improvement, the project also includes an upgrade to the Jacob’s Ladder ATV access trail, making it about 10 feet wide. That project comes
from an approximately $125,000 state grant from 2015, of which about $96,000 is still available.

Several of the approximately 30 attendees at Thursday’s meeting said the road was long overdue and they were glad to see the borough pursuing it, providing access to the private parcels that owners have been paying property taxes on and using in the several decades since the borough decided to subdivide and sell the parcels. In answer to a question about extending the road further, out to Point Possession, though, Knackstedt said it wasn’t likely. The borough would have to purchase further right-of-way and the environmental research and mitigation on the prolific wetlands, which make the project challenging, would likely prevent it, he said.

“It’s where we start getting into those wetlands that kind of throws a monkey wrench into all that permitting,” he said.

Further details and maps of the proposed road are available on the borough’s website.

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