



December 7, 2020

West Susitna Road Project Team:  
Comments Submitted Orally at the Virtual Town Hall

My name is Melissa Heuer, Executive Director of the Susitna River Coalition based in Talkeetna.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the work done so far on the Phase II MOU on the West Susitna Access Road Project. There have been very few opportunities for public participation, and I appreciate this opportunity, though believe one meeting per phase is inadequate for a project of this size.

The timeline for this project is too fast and the scope of outreach is too small.

Opening up 100 Miles of wilderness may or may not be a good thing. But this road has the potential to affect more than half of Alaskans and will connect what is mainly remote access wilderness to half a million year-round residents on the road system along with countless visitors. This area currently has few limitations on hunting, fishing, trapping, recreational access etc. and road access would change all of that by changing the usage in the area.

This project needs to be advertised from Fairbanks to Anchorage and should include a number of town hall meetings. This isn't a ten mile road in the middle of the Borough, this is a road that changes much of Southcentral Alaska and all residents should be aware and able to participate in public meetings before this moves into the next phase.

Additionally, this is opening up a huge industrial area, which will be heavily reliant on truck traffic to move minerals, timber and potentially oil and gas, this type of industrial use is not conducive to recreational users, and I want to make sure that a relevant picture and vision for this road is being conveyed. At this point, there are two very different stories being told.

I'm also concerned about the Borough and the people of the Mat-Su getting the best deal possible. When Phase II was approved, a Borough Wetlands Ordinance was being actively created and vetted. That ordinance has all but died. I'm perplexed as to why the borough wouldn't want that in place before this project starts so that we can benefit financially from our wetland mitigation bank and don't further give resources away like we did with the Donlin trade through the Core of Engineers. These wetlands are valuable and I would think

the Borough would want to ensure maximum returns in exchange for their destruction. Additionally, I'd like to know how the borough plans to avoid a similar give away without an ordinance in place to protect us from another bad Core of Engineers decision.

I also question the economics of this project. Roads are incredibly expensive to maintain and monitor, in addition to all of the other issues they bring. There is currently a thriving fishing and hunting guide community as well as a strong year round and recreational community that provides consistent borough income. An actual cost-benefit analysis should be required to assess if this project is, in reality, a benefit to the Borough.

Lastly, I'd like to know more about the success and viability of this project if SB 204 stalls in Juneau. This bill would remove any oversight from the Borough in regards to construction standards, and removes the years of work that was done through the Borough Land Use planning work for our important Recreational Rivers. This bill has been strongly opposed by the Borough, the Mat-Su Fish and Wildlife Commission and I believe the Borough Assembly. What standards and quality assurances can we expect if you remove all Borough standards and who is responsible for the maintenance, repairs, and remediation of this project?

The Borough is spending millions of dollars replacing inadequate culverts for salmon passage, in addition to spending millions of dollars to bring salmon back to the area and I'm not sure why this road would be broachable unless it was built to the highest existing standards - as AIDEA has recently approved for other large scale industrial projects.

If this bill fails, is industrial development still possible with these regulations in place? Again, that should be included in a thorough cost benefit analysis.

I would also like to highlight the vast cultural importance of this region as well as the value of this this habitat for fish and wildlife. I would like to emphasize the importance of broad public engagement - well beyond the Upper Su area, a more reasonable and slow timeline especially considering the limitations of Covid on outreach and the need to convey a realistic picture of the road and usage as well as the true costs and benefits of such a huge project into such a wild Alaskan area.