

More ferries for less ridership

DOT ponders alternatives at Southeast Conference

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KATIE MORITZ | JUNEAU EMPIRE

Alaska Attorney General Michael Geraghty gives a brief history of the Roadless Rule during the Southeast Conference in Wrangell on Wednesday, as Randy Ruaro, special counsel to the governor, left, and Department of Corrections Commissioner Joe Schmidt look on.

By [KATIE MORITZ](#)

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The Alaska Marine Highway System serves fewer people today with 10 ferries than it did in the early '90s when there were only six.

The ferry system hit its peak in 1992 when it took almost 400,000 people on trips. Since then, ridership has declined despite a growing fleet. Since the system's early '90s peak, ridership has hovered around 300,000 passengers a year.

With a budget of about \$167 million annually, Alaska is paying nearly \$557 per passenger per ride on the ferry system. By comparison, a ferry ticket ranges from about \$30 to about \$90 for longer trips. According to Alaska Department of Transportation numbers, the marine highway gives the Southeast Alaska region the state's highest maintenance and operation cost.

That's just not good math, according to the DOT and Andy Hughes, the department's planning chief for the Southeast Region. He spoke at the Southeast Conference meeting on Wednesday about the department's draft Southeast Alaska Transportation Plan, which would remove ferries from the system and add a 50-mile-long road from Juneau to the Katzeihin River. Drivers would then board a day ferry to Skagway or Haines.

Hughes said the road-and-ferry combo will improve Juneau residents' quality of life by allowing them to go on weekend trips without having to take an extra day off work.

"The mobility of Juneauites to get out of Dodge is way up," he said after his presentation.

The Juneau Access Project, the road's official name, would cost an estimated \$523 million to build and would be completed by 2020, if the plan is successful.

"The Road," as it is casually called, is a polarizing subject in Juneau as well as within Southeast Conference. The group is split about 60-40 on the subject, Executive Director Shelly Wright said, with 60 percent of members against building the road. The organization was formed in the late 1950s specifically to advocate for the establishment of a ferry system.

Because its membership doesn't agree on the road, Southeast Conference is serving in an "information only" capacity and isn't taking a stance, Wright said, although it will probably comment on the project's supplemental environmental impact statement.

Hughes has been touring the region to hold public meetings on the transportation plan. His meeting in Juneau in early August packed the room, mostly with people who wanted to comment on the Road portion of the project.

He said the biggest concerns he's heard so far are with the road's safety during not only winter but year-round travel, and those about accommodating foot passengers on the ferry system. Ultimately, people "need greater opportunity to travel," either via a road or more frequent ferry service, Hughes said.

Hughes wasn't the only Southeast Conference speaker to bring up the Alaska Marine Highway System and its budget. Both Department of Public Safety Deputy Commissioner Terry Vrabec and Randy Ruaro, special counsel to Gov. Sean Parnell, mentioned the ferries of Southeast.

"The marine highway budget tends to get a lot of scrutiny each year" because it costs a lot and not very many people use it, Vrabec said.

Ruaro said Parnell has approved the Alaska Marine Highway System budget for fiscal year 2015, which is a bit larger than its FY 2014 budget of \$167 million. So far, it's the only budget item he's approved.

View the draft Southeast Alaska Transportation Plan online at http://dot.alaska.gov/sereg/projects/satp/assets/SATP_2014_Draft_Final_Web.pdf

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