



SAFER SEWARD HIGHWAY

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



Last Updated: October 2023

1. Why is the Safer Seward Highway (Seward Highway Milepost [MP] 98.5–118, Bird Flats to Rabbit Creek Improvements) Project needed?

The purpose of the proposed Safer Seward Highway Project is to improve public safety. This section of the highway has a much higher rate of fatal and major-injury crashes than similar corridors in the state. As such, in 2006 it was designated a Highway Safety Corridor. Since then, the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) has worked with public safety partners to increase enforcement, improve emergency response times, and educate users. This has helped to reduce serious crashes by 40% overall ([Safety Corridor Audit 2017](#)), but serious crashes are still happening at a high rate and there has not been an improvement to the rate of fatalities. Our plan is to develop improvements to the road cross-section and alignment that will decrease high-severity crashes and provide space for mixed user groups along the corridor.

2. What happened to the Windy Corner projects?

The “Windy Corner” (MPs 105 to 107) and “Windy Corner to Rainbow Point” (MPs 105 to 109.5) projects (collectively referred to as the “Windy Corner projects”) focused on smaller segments of the Seward Highway. In response to public and agency comments on the 2020 Draft Seward Highway: MP 105 to 107, Windy Corner Environmental Assessment (EA), DOT&PF expanded the project to a 20-mile corridor from MP 98.5 to 118. Looking at a larger highway section allows us to develop a more comprehensive safety solution and enable better coordination among agencies on similar issues that occur along the entire corridor.

3. How much of the previous design efforts (e.g., public and agency input, EA and other environmental documents, engineering) will be reused for this expanded project?

Everything! The comments and prior work are the starting point for this EA. Previously completed analyses and design will be considered and used where appropriate.

4. Can the proposed project be constructed within the existing right-of-way (ROW)?

DOT&PF’s top priority is enhancing safety for Seward Highway users. There likely isn’t enough room within the existing ROW to make the needed improvements (e.g., straightening curves, providing space along the road for falling rock or ice, adding lanes, adding a shared-use pathway). Additionally, the highway is currently at or near the minimum separation distance from the Alaska Railroad tracks. It’s likely that we will need to make rock cuts or place fill in Turnagain Arm, the extent of which will be determined during the EA process.

5. Can a separated, non-motorized pathway be constructed as part of the proposed project?

Yes, a separated, non-motorized, shared-use pathway is currently part of the design. During the Windy Corner projects, many public commenters asked for a shared-use pathway.

6. Would the aesthetics be suitable for a Scenic Byway?

We've heard that the public values the scenic nature of the road and surrounding area. During the EA process, we'll evaluate how proposed changes to the highway might affect aesthetics and avoidance, minimization, and mitigation will be evaluated to reduce visual impacts.

7. Will there still be access to the waterside at Windy Corner?

It's too soon to know. The team is utilizing the 2017 Reconnaissance Study and other work done to date at Windy Corner, taking comments from the public and agencies, and then we will determine where we need to develop additional design concepts. Maintaining reasonable access to trails, pullouts, recreation, and scenic opportunities is part of the project.

8. Why improve the highway if the Highway Safety Corridor designation has already improved corridor safety?

The Highway Safety Corridor designation has reduced high-severity crashes, but it hasn't reduced fatal crashes. Safety Corridor designations are intended to be temporary measures, used until long-term safety improvements are constructed. Safety upgrades and traffic operation improvements proposed for this project are the long-term solutions needed to permanently reduce fatal and major-injury crashes. As DOT&PF implements permanent engineered safety improvements, segments of the Seward Highway between MPs 87 and 117 may be removed (i.e., decommissioned) from the Highway Safety Corridor program based on recommendations in future DOT&PF Safety Corridor Audits.

Additional Safety Corridor program information is available at: https://dot.alaska.gov/stwdplng/hwysafety/safety_corridors.shtml.

9. How much will it cost?

At this stage of project development, we haven't prepared cost estimates. The proposed project's cost will depend on the design developed for the EA. The 2017 Reconnaissance Study estimated the project cost at \$830 million; in 2023 dollars, that would be a little over \$1 billion. We will be looking for cost savings and added value as the proposed project advances.

10. How long will the EA take? When will construction start?

DOT&PF is aiming to complete the EA by the end of 2024. Design would follow, with the earliest construction could begin in 2025.

11. Will the environmental document be an EA (similar to the Windy Corner projects)?

Yes. DOT&PF's preliminary analysis indicated an EA is the appropriate class of action based on several factors. The protected resources are well-defined in this corridor, based on the DOT&PF staff's long history of successfully avoiding, minimizing and mitigating impacts to these protected resources and communities over the decades of maintaining, operating and constructing improvements to the Seward Highway along Turnagain Arm. Additionally, the planned highway improvements aren't included in the Federal Highway Administration's list of example projects that normally require an environmental impact statement (listed in 23 Code of Federal Regulations 771.115(a)(1) through (6)).

12. Where will road-building material come from? Will it be mined from Chugach State Park?

We're working with resource agencies, including Chugach State Park, to identify important natural resources within the corridor. We're currently designing a proposed alignment that we'll present to the public, agencies, and other stakeholders. At that time, we'll know more about where road building materials will come from and any potential impacts to Chugach State Park.

13. What is TransportationX?

The Safer Seward Highway Project has been designated as an Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) TransportationX project. The TransportationX program involves new ways of working that are outcome rather than process focused, and emphasizes community teaming, agile project management processes, and new ways of resourcing to achieve success. These efforts contribute to our vision of organizational excellence and Safety, State of Good Repair, Economic Vitality, Resiliency, and Sustainable Transportation investment areas. For more information, check out [DOT&PF's TransportationX Program \(arcgis.com\)](https://arcgis.com).

14. Who is the Project Manager?

The short answer is that DOT&PF Deputy Commissioner Katherine Keith is leading this project. However, under the agile project management process, leadership roles are not based on levels of importance/status, which helps foster a more collaborative and outcome-oriented team. Other DOT&PF leaders—Shannon McCarthy, Lauren Little, and Sean Baski—provide guidance and support as part of this dynamic project team. The team is split into cross-functional action teams with oversight from HDR's Chris Hughes, who serves as the action team liaison to project leadership, and action team leadership from HDR's Edith McKee for Engineering, Katherine Wood for Communications, and Taylor Horne for Environmental.

15. How would any new improvements be maintained? Can we afford it?

Maintenance costs would increase for additional pavement surface, such as for plowing. However, we expect costs would be offset by having fewer instances of the maintenance crew needing to set up traffic control/road closures to remove falling rocks and ice. New facilities would also initially reduce maintenance costs because the signs, guardrail, and pavement would not need replacement for some time. We also expect that the improvements would reduce community traffic delay, traffic control, and emergency response costs as well as offset some maintenance costs.

16. Is the project team considering a no build alternative?

Yes, analysis of the no build alternative is a required part of the Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) and will be considered throughout the entire National Environmental Policy Act process. Once the Draft EA review period is complete, DOT&PF will review all feedback and decide whether to select the no build or build alternative.

17. Will this project take away resources from other projects that need to get done?

Part of the funds needed for this project have already been allocated in the Alaska Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) 2020–2023 budget (Need ID 12641). The project team is looking at other funding sources, such as federal grants, to fill that remaining gap as we start to move toward an idea of what the final improvements will be and their estimated costs. The STIP outlines all proposed federal highway-funded expenditures with a goal of balancing the safety and resiliency of our highway system with state, regional, and community desires.

18. How much will it cost to mitigate impacts on protected species and wetlands?

It is too early to know for sure. The project team has started collecting wildlife and wetlands information and data. We conducted a bald and golden eagle survey in May 2023; we will be conducting wetlands investigations, cultural resources surveys, and coordination with NMFS regarding the beluga whale migration during September and October 2023. We currently do not know what the exact footprint of the project will be, but the environmental and engineering teams will work together to develop a range of alternative footprints that will have varying impacts. Impacts on resources and mitigation plans will be shared in the Draft EA for public and agency review and comment.

19. How can you build into the Cook Inlet with the beluga whales?

All project work will comply with the Marine Mammal Protection Act and Endangered Species Act. Turnagain Arm is designated critical habitat for endangered Cook Inlet beluga whales. Any in-water construction will be completed with mitigation measures, to the extent practicable, to reduce impacts on beluga whales, other marine mammals, and their habitat. These mitigation measures will be identified during consultation with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), which has management authority over beluga whales and other marine mammals within the project area. Mitigation measures could include performing work at low tide when the area is dry, stopping work when beluga whales or other marine mammals are near the work area, and/or using designated observers to implement and document the mitigation measures as specified by the NMFS permit. The team will be considering mitigation ideas during engineering design. Any potential impacts on beluga whales, other marine mammals, and their habitat, as well as mitigation measures to reduce these impacts, will be detailed in the EA, which will be available for public and agency review and comment.

20. Does the traffic data require widening the highway?

The purpose of the project is to improve safety along the highway for all users, and with the addition of shoulders and pedestrian pathways, rock catchment, and passing or deceleration lanes, it may be that the highway is wider in many sections. Many people have expressed concern over whether or not the project will widen the highway for additional vehicle traffic, and while traffic data analyzed to date appears to support the need for additional capacity, our analysis is not yet complete. Bear in mind that traffic data is only one component of determining the footprint of road, that could result in a wider typical highway section but other factors may limit an increase of highway width including topography and the need to avoid sensitive cultural, habitat, or recreational areas.

The team has started preparing a capacity and safety analysis, which will provide more information to facilitate design decisions. We are also updating the traffic numbers/projections to reflect existing conditions, rather than relying on older data. This will help us better understand the issues needing to be solved. When these analyses are complete, we will share them with the public.

21. Can a median barrier be enough to solve the highway's safety issue?

A median barrier is one option the team is considering. Based on available crash data, we can see that most highway fatalities between 2016 and 2021 were from head-on collisions. While median barriers can help prevent head-on collisions, they also have downsides. When looking into the use of a median barrier for this project, we will consider:

- Will the barrier provide the effectiveness needed?
- Will the barrier pose other safety hazards? What is the risk of vehicles deflecting back into traffic they strike the barrier?
- What additional space will be needed for the barrier? Will the additional space be used effectively to reduce crashes?
- Will the barrier impede the ability to properly maintain the corridor and provide emergency access?

While separating traffic will aid in preventing head-on collisions, we are taking a comprehensive look at all crash types. We will carefully consider ways to separate traffic to determine which method would be most effective and what is possible to build within the project corridor.

Questions?

Email the project team directly at: info@safersewardhighway.com

Visit the Contact Us page on our website for more options:

SaferSewardHighway.com