

IDITAROD NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL

PUBLIC MEETING AND HEARING

ALYESKA, ALASKA

December 4, 2003

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PROCEEDINGS

(Alyeska, AK - 12/4/03)

MR. MORRISON: My understanding is that we're leaning towards Alternative 4, for this Iditarod Trail Project. Some of my concerns are that on the Seward end of the Lost Lake Trail it's too difficult and dangerous for snowmobilers to negotiate. I feel that thin ice on Kenai Lake could pose a threat to snowmobilers as a through route on the Iditarod Trail. I feel that the Twentymile Corridor is causing a lot of problems that never existed. There's easement issues, there's management issues, there's enforcement issues that are created through the closure through Twentymile Valley and I don't think it's worth the effort to put into that.

Up in Blueberry Pass from Twentymile Valley over to the Winter Creek area, I don't feel that the Forest Service should close that to snowmobiles even though it's not a feasible snowmobile route, I don't think that they should limit access because of that. And also in the Winter Creek section of the Iditarod Trail here in Girdwood, I don't believe that should be closed to snowmobiles either. The reasoning that I heard Allison say was because there's no trail head access right now, but I've heard that there are plans to develop Winter Creek and that there could be roads into that area in the future, so a trail could be made at that time.

And that's it for my comments.

MR. SCHULDT: Dwaine Schuldt, I'm Chairman of the Trails Committee, but here just as representing myself from the Valley. I dog mush and I have a snowmachine, no dog musher is without a snowmachine. But also I have a lot of snowmachine friends. I think there's an opportunity for all of us, snowmachines and hikers and dog mushers and everyone, to take advantage of this trail that can be a reality. And I think if the friction -- if we can all try to work together and stop a lot of the friction and work on the trail, it'll be a good project. A lot of times when the bureaucracy looks at friction, they tend to shy away from situations and from projects like this. And I think the Alternative 4 is a good alternative to try to work out a lot of these situations.

And I think in the Girdwood Valley area, of course, with the municipality not allowing the snowmachines, this is all safety and that's why also up in Winter Creek area it wouldn't be good to open that up, again, for safety in the Valley. It isn't that it isn't rideable, but we have too many people in this Valley and it's a small valley and that's why we had a vote at the Trails Committee on this before and the reason is just a safety issue. You'd have to build a trail 30 feet wide to try to be able to get your visual to be able to ride at any type of speed at all. But mainly it's just all the aspects. I wish snowmachines were quiet and then people doing this (hand motion) nobody would ever know, but those are things

that happen and it causes some hostilities and a lot of that can be overshadowed on all the good things that this trail will offer all of us.

TWIRL: Okay. I'd just like reinforce what Andy said on Kenai Lake.....

REPORTER: Can you please step to the microphone?

TWIRL:it just doesn't freeze over that often at all, about 10 percent of the time, so it's a very small area to connect, as you can see there. And that would relieve a safety issue there.

The Twentymile Corridor, Twentymile hasn't been opened in three years and the Corridor, I mean, sometimes there's so much snow out there it has to be snowmachine trail for non-motorized users to use. So, like I say, that's causing a lot of problems as well.

And the Blueberry Pass, good point, it's not that feasible, but it might be in the future coming from the Girdwood side, not necessarily Twentymile.

MR. LARSON: Well, I'd like to say I think this is a good project, too, and one of the things that you have to look at with these trails is the economic development. And I come from a state -- it's been a long time I've been in Alaska, but there's over 15,000 miles of trail in the state that I came from, snowmobile trails, that connects to the communities, that

provided economic benefits for everyone along the route and I'm afraid that we kind of -- I don't want to say missed it in the Forest Plan, but you can't anticipate everything. I used to work for the Forest Service, I worked on this Forest Plan. And I use all types of access.

I just want to read a little thing about, this is from the Iditarod National Historic Trail, Seward to Nome, it's the BLM Plan and it's basically on off road vehicle use. And Section 7(c) of the National Trails Act, amended to, PO 95.625 states: Other use along the historic trails which will not substantially interfere with the nature and the propose of the trail, including the use of motorized vehicles shall be permitted. Potential trail uses, designated components of the national trails system may include, but are not limited to the following: bicycling, cross-country skiing, day hiking, equestrian activities, jogging or similar fitness activities, trail hiking, overnight and long distance backpacking, snowmobiling and surface water and underwater activities. Vehicles which may be permitted on certain trails may include but need not limited to motorcycles, bicycles, 4-wheel drive or all terrain off road vehicles.

I'm not advocating that the Forest Service open this trail in the summer to motorized use. There's a lot of places out there that really aren't conducive to that, but I really -- I'd like to make sure that it is opened to winter

use.

Some of the things that Andy mentioned on Kenai Lake, in particular, in the 16-plus years that I've been here, I've only been on the ice of that lake once. And I was dog mushing with Irene Lindquist out of the Seward district, and it was questionable even then, it was right out of Trail River Campground.

The Winter Creek route, while it may not be feasible, I have been up at the pass and looked down into Winter Creek Valley on my snowmachine, I know you can do it. As far as avalanche danger, Crow Pass is really out of the question and much of it is in Chugach State Park. But the entire forest is dangerous, there's avalanches everywhere out there, on the skiing side, on the snowmachine side, we've seen it both place, everywhere on the forest. You can't minimize those risks. I just want you to know that you can limit -- but through education you can limit your risks, but you can never eliminate them completely.

Thank you very much.

MR. FRANKEVICH: Hi, my name is Robbie Frankevich. I guess I've been in this valley for about almost 20 years. I hiked the pass going -- Blueberry Pass and I backpack up there, put in on the Twentymile and float out, so I do a loop right from here.

As far as avalanche dangers, three years ago if

you were at the base of Blueberry Pass on summer solstice, June 21st, you would have been standing on 20 feet of avalanche debris. There's a small moraine down there. Where Winter Creek popped out, it was totally buried under avalanche debris. That is extremely high avalanche danger. And I guess I don't have a problem with anyone taking acceptable risk and out there snowmachining and burying themselves, but it's also highly used by other skiers and you'd be putting other people at risk if you ever created an avalanche in that area because the valley is extremely narrow. The wind blast, you can see trees that on the opposite side the avalanche came down snapped off. So it is a very dangerous area out there and the mix of skiers and snowmachiners would be a pretty dangerous thing.

I've been in this valley, and Twirl and Rudi von Imhof, I've heard them come before the Girdwood Trails Committee and I've been at public meetings and it was hard to find anybody in the community who was all in favor of the commercial snowmachine operation. And I would be -- you know, opening that to up to snowmachining then would open the possibility to commercial snowmachining and in these meetings people just said, no, no, no. And I just could not be in favor of opening anything in the Girdwood Valley to snowmachining. You know, as somebody who's listened to a lot of public meetings, it was hard to find support. There was a BOS meeting with some support, but most of the support was anti-

snowmachining.

And I would have to say, you know, I love the Iditarod Trail Plan, I think it's great opportunity, but as just one person on the Girdwood Trails Committee, I would have to say that I would personally recommend withdrawing support for the Iditarod Trail if it allowed used of snowmachining in this Valley.

Thank you.

MS. FRANKEVICH: I'm Joan Frankevich, I'm an avid trail user, hiker, skier, cross-country skier, dog musher and skijourner and I'm a 12-year resident of the Valley. And I fully support maintaining the closure to snowmobile use for commercial and recreational throughout Girdwood Valley, especially Winter Creek going to Four Corners and Upper Winter Creek area, and also Portage.

I use the Forest Service land a lot for recreation, snowmobile and non-motorized recreation has a lot of conflicts that would be detrimental to me by means. After a snowmobile passes me; you can smell it quite a long time. The noise is loud. The visual aspects, a lot of people don't mention, but there's a completely different experience to look across the meadow with one trail across it versus completely mowed down with snowmobiling. There's also safety issues.

And I'm not opposed to snowmobiling, it's a great winter sport, but according to DNR, over 95 percent of

the public lands in Southcentral Alaska are opened to snowmobiling, there's very few that are opened to just quiet recreation. Girdwood is one of the few valleys that is. And strongly believe it should remain that way.

I'd also like go in -- I've been involved for many years in similar type meetings about snowmobiling in Girdwood, I'd like to give a little bit of history. There have been two times in the past where Girdwood has discussed this issue at length, at the Girdwood Trails Committee, at the Girdwood Land Use Committee and at the Board of Supervisors meeting. One was a proposal, a commercial proposal, by Alaska Snowmobile Safaris to have guided commercial tours in the Valley and the other was an ordinance by Ted Carlson in the Assembly to open up portions of the municipality in Girdwood and Anchorage and elsewhere.

So in response to that I have two letters that I will submit to you. This one is to the Heritage Land Bank, it is from the Board of Supervisors. And I'll just read some of the things it says. This one is in response to the proposal by Alaska Snowmobile Safaris. It says it generated quite a bit of discussion. At the Trails Committee meeting nine voting members of the 15-member committee voted 8-1 with one abstention to oppose the snowmobile proposal. Two votes were taken at the Land Use Committee opposing it, one vote was zero in support, 24 [sic] against and another vote was one support,

25 against this proposal. And the GBOS said they heard testimony at the regular GBOS meeting and the majority of public and the input reflects opposition to snowmachining in Girdwood.

The same was true in the Board of Supervis -- in the second snowmobile, there was a great deal of public input, almost all opposed. And here's a GBOS resolution regarding that.

And just regarding people get concerned when they think there's a closure, but I'd just like to point out, this really isn't a closure, it's a change of land status and it's really just keeping the status quo to keep it closed.

MR. BOB DUGAN: I'm not sure I understand all of your alternatives yet, I'm still studying them. But I guess what I would say is that I've been all over all the ridges and valleys in Girdwood, watersheds, many times for 25 years, so I'm opposed to anything that even comes close to motorizing anything in this Valley.

My understanding is that for the rest of the alternatives most of the action is down south of Trail River; is that correct? The difference in the -- so I'm definitely opposed to Alternative 3 which motorizes the route into Winter Creek; is that correct?

JIM: Yes.

MR. BOB DUGAN: Okay. As for the other

alternatives, well, I can't comment on them, I haven't looked at them closely enough. From what I can tell, you're staying close, right adjacent to the roads, so I'm not sure I would have a big problem with any of them as long as none of them are in areas that are no currently non-motorized. But I would oppose anything that motorizes something that's currently non-motorized.

Thank you.

MR. SHIVELY: My name is Jeff Shively. First, I'd like to firmly state that I am adamantly opposed to allowing snowmachine use on currently non-motorized managed areas in the forest. Areas that do not currently allow motorized vehicles are well valued by skiers, hikers, paddlers, nature lovers and recreationists alike. People travel through the areas of the nation forest to escape the noises and poor air quality found throughout the urban areas of Alaska. Chugach National Forest, being so close to the populated areas of Alaska, needs to have managed zones that are set aside for non-motorized use. Not every Alaska resident is a snowmachine rider and not every Alaskan likes to be in close proximity to the noisy, smelly machines. Many of us, including myself, find snowmachine to be obnoxious and degrading to the overall enjoyment of winter recreation in the forest.

Snowmachines disturb plants and animals and can disrupt the potential survival of struggling species during

harsh winters. Animals are often harassed by the noise of these machines and the stench of the machines' exhaust, often adding additional unneeded stress to these creatures during the winter months. Plants lying beneath the snow pack are often compacted and damaged by the heavy machines riding over the top of them. Tree branches are often broken by snowmachine driving along forest fringes and within thickly treed areas. And periods of deep snow are not protection enough for plants and animals that live below areas that are compacted by snowmachine trails.

During the fall and spring seasons it's easy to imagine important wetland habitats being impacted by snowmachine use. Riparian areas and muskegs are susceptible to damage caused by snowmachine trails over areas with little or no snow. Since snow covered muskeg and riparian habitats are most often the fastest areas in the spring to melt because of their exposure to the sun and proximity to streams, these areas become very susceptible to damage even when ample snow exists elsewhere.

In conclusion, I do not believe it is smart to open up non-motorized areas to motorized use because of this project. Impacts to the land by these machines are too great to allow unregulated use of snowmachines in areas previously closed to the machines. The small amounts of areas in Alaska that are actually closed to motorized use are too valuable of

an asset to all present and future generations of Alaskans. I encourage you to factor into your decision the aesthetic value of silence in our forests and the ecological impacts that snowmachines have on the environment. I urge you to respect the land and respect the value of non-motorized areas.

Thank you.

MR. STONE: My name is Eben Stone and I am opposed to opening any areas that are currently non-motorized to motorized use. As Joan Frankevich said, 95 percent of Southcentral is opened to motorized use, five percent, you know, the gentleman that just spoke said, it's quiet, it's nice that it's quiet. We go out there because it's beautiful and it's quiet. And I don't -- you know, I went up to Turnagain Pass last year and I didn't even want to ski on the non-motorized side because all I could hear on the other side was (make sound) back and forth and back and forth. And, you know, while it wasn't on my side and I didn't have to ski through the track, I don't want to ski around that, it's unpleasant, even when it's around me, even if I don't have to ski on the tracks.

And I am vehemently opposed to any snowmachining in the Girdwood Valley, any kind of motorized use on the trails. You know, the Trails Committee has been pouring just untold numbers of volunteer man hours into creating trails for non-motorized use and people come out here from the city because they enjoy it, they know they're there, they don't have

to listen to snowmachines, it's like sanctuary and it would be unfair to open up any part of that after all the work we've done and the people who come here and enjoy it. It would be unfair to open it up to snowmachine use.

That's all I have to say.

MR. TROY DUGAN: Tory Dugan and I'm also totally opposed to opening any new motorized areas that were originally non-motorized. You can see on the map that the green space very small compared to the rest. And in the last 10 years it's been getting steadily smaller. And I could think of four million reasons for this, okay? One reason is the technology of the machine, that just opened up a huge amount of terrain that they can access, that might have been opened to them but it really wasn't really because they couldn't access it. Well, now the machines are good enough.

The independent snowmachiners, people that aren't guided, the population of them is exploding. You know, you drive into Anchorage in the morning on the weekend or even a week day in the winter, if there's any snow at all, and every other car is towing snowmachines, okay?

The third reason is business that guide and rent motorized equipment, heli-skiing and snowmachine tours, have sprung up. And the fourth reason is that every time this process happens and we talk about it and we make another plan, more country is given to motorists than taken.

Now, if tax money is going to be spent by the Forest Service then I would rather see it used for regulation of non-motorized country because I'm out there all the time and it gets poached.

MR. MAYNARD: I'm Chris Maynard with Alaska Snow Safaris, we're a commercial outfit here in the Girdwood Valley. A couple of comments I'd like to make from a commercial standpoint is, first of all, the economic impact of a motorized trail, like what's being proposed, is huge. I just spent the last two months traveling the Lower 48 trying to promote winter tourism in Alaska, which encompasses everything from a guide snowmobile ride to dog mushing, to skiing, to snowshoeing. And a lot of that originates from right here in this Girdwood Valley. And the issue with that right now is that there is not an interconnecting trail system, not necessarily right from the Girdwood Valley, but even from the surrounding area. There's five miles here, two miles there, nothing that is readily accessible for the average beginner to intermediate client. So something that would provide a groomed, interconnecting, safe route for our operations would be huge.

So obviously we're in support of Alternative number 4 that maybe with some safety provisions along the lakes and rivers. So from an economic standpoint, you know, snowmobiling is the fast growing winter sport in the nation.

That's a prove statistic and we need to address these issues accordingly as we grow and manage the Plan.

As far as snowmobiling right in the Girdwood Valley, you know, I don't foresee or expect any snowmachining right here in the Girdwood Valley. I respect everybody's peace and quiet here in the Valley. One point to make out, though, is that the Upper Winter Creek Valley currently sits on State land and currently that is opened to snowmobiling. If someone wanted to hire Keith to fly them in there with their helicopter they could. Or if somebody had the talent to ride up from the backside of Twentymile over Blueberry Ridge, they could. So with this trail going in, you know, they're not talking about opening or closing something that was already opening or closing something that was already opened or closed, I mean, currently it's opened; there is just no access from Girdwood. So kind of keep that in mind with your comments.

I'm not saying we need to punch through from Girdwood, I just really want to see somewhere in the Chugach National Forest some kind of connecting trail that can provide a safe economically viable place for operation for a commercial business. We try to be good pillars of the community and neighbors and we want to continue that relationship with everybody here in the Girdwood Valley.

And one last comment was, out of the 95 percent of snowmobile areas, you know, that are opened for motorized

use in Southcentral Alaska, in reality probably only five to seven percent of that is easily accessible, the rest of that is, you know, ridge tops or property that's out in the middle of Prince William Sound. I mean, who's going to take a boat out into Prince William Sound to go snowmobiling? So really why you're seeing a lot of this bottle necking is because the areas where people are riding are the most easily accessible or attainable access. And so that's why you're seen some explosion over the last few years. So I think if you put in this interconnecting trail system everybody will kind of spread out a little bit and you won't have all these pockets of intensity amounts of people. So build the trail and they will disappear.

Thank you.

MR. MEADE: Thank you very much. With all sincerity, really appreciate your insights, your comments, we'll take them with a great deal of sincerity and along with those we'll glean this Saturday at Moose Pass. If you want another opportunity, Moose Pass, I think the hearing there, the open discussion will start at one with the hearing there at two.

Thanks again very much for your commitment to public service and your national forest.

(Off record)

