

Municipality of Anchorage



*P.O. Box 390
Girdwood, Alaska 99587
<http://www.muni.org/gbos>*

Ethan Berkowitz, Mayor

*GIRDWOOD VALLEY SERVICE AREA BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
Sam Daniel & Jerry Fox, Co-Chairs
Robert Snitzer, Eryn Boone*

March 28, 2017

The Honorable Bill Walker
Governor of Alaska
3rd Floor, Alaska State Capitol
Juneau, AK 99811

Mayor Ethan Berkowitz
Municipality of Anchorage
632 W 6th Avenue, Suite 840
Anchorage, AK 99501

RE: Seward Highway Safety

Dear Governor Walker and Mayor Berkowitz,

In response to the restrictions of recent State budgets, the Alaska State Troopers (AST) have decreased trooper service on the Seward Highway from MP 111 to MP 75. In a recent letter, Col. Cockrell advised that after April 30, 2017, there will be no Alaska State Trooper presence on this segment of the Seward Highway outside of limited Division of Highway Patrol (DHP) traffic enforcement.

This circumstance is unprecedented. After AST pull-out on May 1, 2017, the Seward Highway may become the only road in the entire United States without consistent dedicated policing and enforcement of basic traffic laws.

The ongoing battle between the Municipality of Anchorage (MOA) and the State of Alaska is complex. Anchorage Municipal Charter prohibits provision of services outside the service area that pays for those services. The Seward Highway is not contained in any municipal police service area. State attorneys say that the area is within the MOA and is the MOA's responsibility.

Classified as a Scenic Byway and All-American Road, the winding, two-lane undivided highway is bordered by the ocean on one side and rocky cliffs and embankments on the other. In the winter, weather creates challenging driving conditions that are fast-changing and unpredictable as temperatures and weather between South Anchorage and Portage are often vastly different. In the summer, families fishing for

hooligan park on the side of the highway, sightseers seek pull-outs to watch sheep and belugas, surfers and other groups seeking their adventures off the road create unusual hazards for drivers.

Unfortunately, the consequences of an inattentive moment on the Seward Highway often result in head-on collisions with tragic results. Most residents of Girdwood know at least one person who has been killed on the road.

The Seward Highway is the primary transportation corridor of the Kenai Peninsula; it is an economic engine of the State's economy, and a major factor in tourism in the southcentral region. It is estimated that 700,000 residents and visitors travel to the Kenai Peninsula by road each year. The vast majority of goods and services for the 58,000 residents of the Kenai Peninsula Borough also travel on this highway.

AST statistics clearly document that increased police presence from the BHP officers, combined with other AST presence, has decreased serious accidents and fatalities on the Seward Highway in recent years. It stands to reason that Seward Highway accidents will increase with less police coverage.

While an increase in fatalities on the road is the most serious potential consequence of decreased police service, there are also financial and personal consequences to every hour of road closure. Serious accidents require crime scene investigation on site. After a recent fatality on the highway near Portage, the road was closed for two and a half hours, after which the AST opened one lane of traffic while the scene was investigated. It is currently undetermined who would respond to such an incident after May 1, 2017, and how long the road would be closed waiting for a response.

While the conversation continues between the Municipal and State legal teams, the issue of highway enforcement needs to be resolved immediately, to avoid a lapse in enforcement after AST ends service on May 1.

In the short term, there must be an agency designated to Seward Highway proactive enforcement. Ideally, the Alaska State Legislature would fund the AST to allow adequate enforcement on the Seward Highway until the State and MOA arrive at a long-term solution. Another option would be a temporary pay-for-service arrangement subsidized by the State and paired with MOA area wide funds to allow APD officers to patrol this section of the highway. This alleviates the burden of AST having to patrol the area with such lean resources.

In the longer term, the MOA and State must resolve what agency is responsible for highway enforcement and make arrangements to take that responsibility on with proper funding and staff. Ideally, the Alaska State Legislature would fund the AST to a level allowing for adequate enforcement on the highway. Another option is for the MOA Police Service Area be expanded to include the Turnagain Arm, and then create a highway patrol funded through a combination of MOA Area Wide taxes, state and federal funding. This could become a model for other boroughs in Alaska as the AST highway enforcement continues to shrink. This spreads the cost of the service more broadly among all users, not just the residents of the area.

The question of who is responsible for the highway and how patrols and investigations are paid for is beyond the scope of the Girdwood Board of Supervisors. Upon learning of AST elimination of service in our community in 2015, the Girdwood Board of Supervisors set out to find a solution and has contracted for law enforcement in our community.

It is the purpose of government to provide for the general welfare of its citizens. The State of Alaska and the Municipality of Anchorage must take action on this issue. It should be the highest priority of both entities as time is running short. Abandoning the responsibility of enforcement of the Seward Highway shows a lack of good governance and is unacceptable. Many lives are at risk daily as residents and visitors travel the Seward Highway.

Sincerely,



Girdwood Board of Supervisors
Sam Daniel and Jerry Fox, Co-chairs

Encl: DOT Seward Highway Accident profiles

Cc: Senator Lisa Murkowski
Senator Dan Sullivan
Congressman Don Young
Alaska State Legislators
Anchorage Assembly
Walt Monegan, Alaska Public Safety Commissioner
Colonel James E. Cockrell, Director, AST
Chief Chris Tolley, APD
City Governments/Councils/Chambers of Commerce for: Seward, Kenai, Soldotna, Whittier, Cooper Landing, Homer, Sterling, Hope
Alaska Trucking Association
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