



Federal Highway Administration

Rural Transportation Planning Workshops

Alaska Workshop

FINAL DRAFT

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Road mileage data included in this report is from the Federal Highway Administration, 1996, and can be accessed at www.fhwa.dot.gov/ohim/1996/section5.html.

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Federal Highway Administration

Rural Transportation Planning Workshops

Alaska Workshop



1.0 Introduction

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), assisted by Dye Management Group, Inc., conducted a series of regional rural transportation planning workshops from October 1998 through July 1999. The Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities hosted the tenth regional workshop on July 26, in Girdwood.

These workshops were structured to allow the exchange of success stories and dialogue between neighboring states and their representatives on how to make rural transportation planning effective. In addition, the workshops were used to assemble information on how local elected officials are involved in the statewide transportation planning process. Officials from across Alaska, including planning representatives, district/county engineers, local elected officials, rural planning organizations, economic development agencies, tribal governments, departments of transportation, and rural transit operators were invited to attend. The information gathered at the Alaska workshop is presented for Alaska alone. Overall workshop findings and conclusions, including comparisons with other states, follow the state summary.

1.1 Objectives

The purpose of the workshops was to foster dialogue and the exchange of ideas, not formal presentations. The objectives of the workshops were to:

- Explore and promote effective ways to involve rural officials in the statewide transportation planning process.
- Enable participants to share experiences in rural transportation planning and programming.
- Build relationships among participants that can form the basis for future cooperation and coordination.
- Identify the most effective roles and responsibilities for rural transportation providers and users.

- Determine rural transportation needs and issues that are being addressed by planning and programming.
- Identify best practice planning techniques used in developing successful rural projects.
- Obtain information for a report to Congress on how responsive state transportation plans and the statewide transportation planning process are to rural concerns and how rural officials are involved in the planning process.

These objectives were achieved by working through an agenda of discussion topics. Workshop participants were asked to come prepared to provide input around specific questions that they were given in advance.

1.2 Discussion Topics

Five principal discussion topics were addressed in the workshop. Knowledgeable individuals from Alaska, from both the state department of transportation perspective and the local rural perspective, were asked to address these discussion topics. The topics were:

- **The Process and the Outcome: How Planning for Rural Areas Is Conducted**

This topic covered the following questions:

- How is planning for rural areas conducted?
- How are rural transportation needs addressed in the development of the statewide transportation improvement program?
- How are rural officials involved in decision making?
- What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses in your state?

- **Jurisdictional Roles, Responsibilities, and Funding**

This topic covered the following questions:

- What are the jurisdictional roles and responsibilities in your state for planning, programming, and funding improvements in rural areas?
- How are plan decisions funded?

- **Integration/Coordination with Other Plans**

This topic covered the following questions:

- How are local/regional plans coordinated with other plans?

- How are local rural goals balanced against regional/statewide goals and objectives?

- **Success Stories**

This topic covered the following question:

- What success stories do you have of innovative programs and projects that address rural needs?

- **Other Issues**

This topic covered the following question:

- What are the major rural transportation issues facing rural areas in your state, for all modes?

1.3 Participants

State departments of transportation were solicited to host the rural transportation planning workshops. Based upon the response, host states were identified and nearby states were then invited to attend. The Alaska workshop focused only on Alaska.

Knowledgeable individuals, from both the state department of transportation perspective and the local rural perspective, were invited to attend the workshops. The objective was to have balanced participation, representing a variety of rural transportation stakeholders, actively participate in the workshop forum. Participants included local, state, and federal planning representatives; county engineers and commissioners; local elected officials; councils of governments; regional planning organizations; economic development agencies; tribal governments; and rural transit operators. National organizations represented at the workshops included the:

- Community Transportation Association of America.
- Federal Highway Administration.
- Federal Transit Administration.
- National Association of Counties.
- National Association of County Engineers.
- National Association of Development Organizations.

The local elected officials who participated in the workshops included rural mayors, county commissioners, judges/county executives, public works directors, trustees, and former state legislators. Because Alaska is not structured on a county system, county-related representatives did not attend that workshop.

1.4 Report Structure

The format of this report is based on the workshop objectives and topic areas, as follows:

- The Rural Planning Process.
- Programming and Funding for Rural Area Decisions.
- Major Planning Issues.
- Identified Strengths and Weaknesses.
- Success Stories.

A list of workshop participants and maps of Alaska are included in the attachments.

2.0 Alaska

Alaska contains 26,816 lane miles of roads, 22,889 lane miles of which are rural, and 4,035 of these rural miles are on the National Highway System. Thirty-four percent of rural roads are locally owned. Alaska's rural transportation planning process is considered to be a blend of top-down and bottom-up methods. The Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) also owns and operates 261 of the state's 1,112 airports/seaplane bases/aircraft landing areas, and oversees 3,500 miles of marine highway and 97 harbors.

2.1 The Rural Planning Process

Alaska is divided into three geographic regions by the Alaska DOT&PF for general planning and the statewide transportation improvement program (STIP). Each area is assigned Alaska DOT&PF staff to plan regionally, assist with local plans, and solicit and prioritize project nominations. Alaska is also has five regions for longer range plan development.

Unlike most states, Alaska is represented by multiple levels of regional planning and development organizations or agencies, as described below.

- There are 12 Alaska regional development organizations (ARDORs) covering about two-thirds of Alaska, with two more organizations filing for recognition with the Department of Economic and Community Development. Among other qualifying criteria, an ARDOR must have a population of at least 80,000 or encompass 12,000 square miles. Each ARDOR receives approximately \$55,000 annually from the state through the Municipal and Regional Assistance Division for local planning purposes.
- There are 12 Native regional corporations formed under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. Native corporations do not receive state planning funds. In addition there are approximately 70 entities created by the Indian Reorganization Act, which are consulted with by the Alaska DOT&PF. There are also other tribal governments besides those created under the settlement and reorganization acts.
- There are 16 organized boroughs covering almost one-third of Alaska, and an unorganized borough encompassing the remainder. Organized boroughs have the authority to levy taxes and create transportation, utility, or other governmental districts and entities. Unorganized boroughs are governed by the state.

All planning, development, and governmental agencies are encouraged to participate in Alaska DOT&PF public involvement procedures, such as nominating and reviewing projects for the STIP, although they do not have formal roles or responsibilities in the transportation planning process.

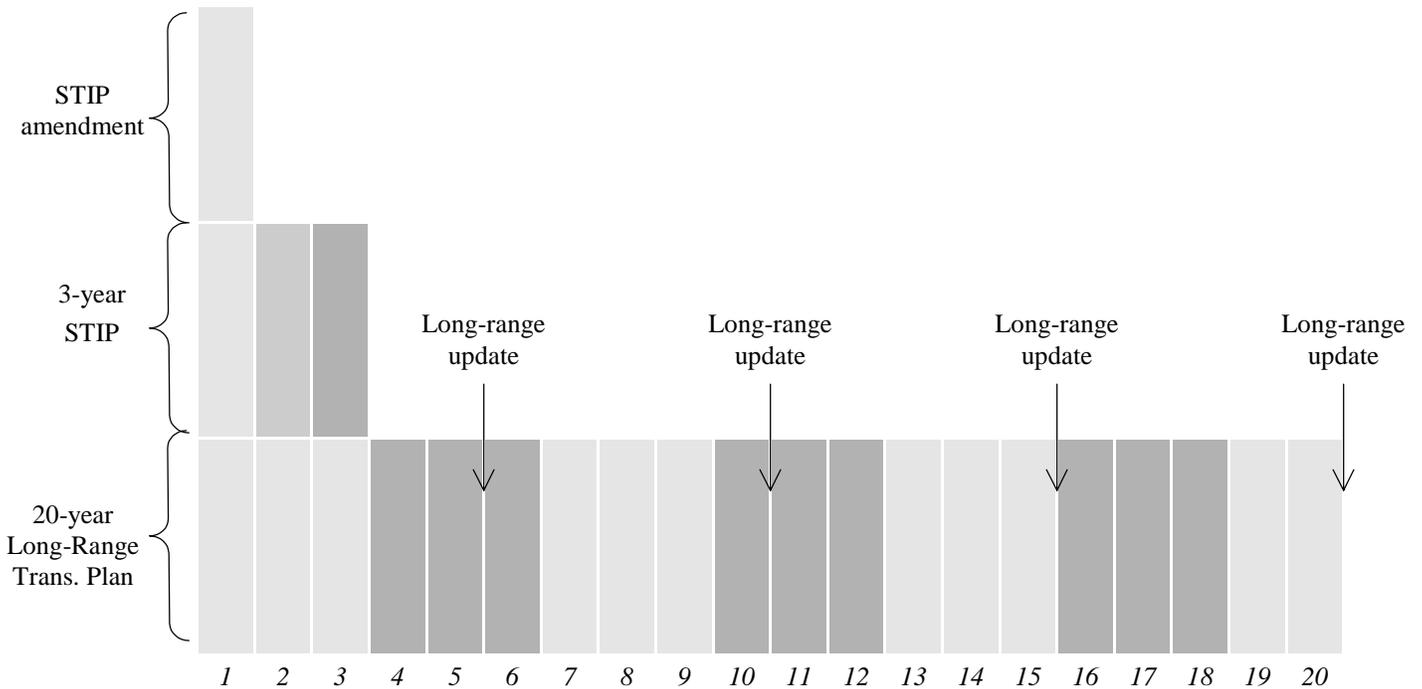
Principal Rural Planning Activities

The following chronological activities outline Alaska’s transportation planning process for non-National Highway System (NHS) projects. Planning steps that are preceded by → indicate public involvement, and planning activities marked by ● are conducted outside of the public arena.

- Project selection and prioritization criteria are published and made available for public review.
- Projects are nominated by the public, boroughs, cities, tribal governments, villages, Native corporations, federal/state agencies, interest groups, and the Alaska DOT&PF. Project nominations are accepted any time, but are only evaluated once a year.
- The Alaska DOT&PF regional planning offices score existing and nominated projects using evaluation criteria. The top projects are forwarded to the statewide Project Evaluation Board, which consists of: the deputy commissioner for operations; the Design and Engineering Services director; the Statewide Planning director; and the central, northern, and southern regional directors.
- Each member of the Project Evaluation Board scores the projects, and their scores for each project are averaged for a final score. The projects are then classified as a Priority 1 or 2 based on their ranking. (Projects that do not score high enough at the regional level to go on to the state level are classified as Priority 3 and 4 projects.)
- Priority 1 and 2 projects formulate the Needs List, which is distributed for public review for 45 days. Public meetings are also held in each region and in major cities to gather input.
- Input is summarized by the regional planning offices and submitted to the Project Evaluation Board. The board may add new projects and re-score existing ones. Projects are then scheduled into the three-year STIP based on their score, cost, and special considerations.
- The STIP is distributed for public review for 45 days. Input can be provided by letter, phone, email, or fax. Taking into consideration the input received, the Alaska DOT&PF then finalizes the STIP and submits it to the FHWA for approval.
- Amendments to the STIP are made available for public comment for 30 days.
- The STIP becomes part of the 20-year long-range statewide transportation plan. This policy plan is updated about every five years, either in part or whole, at the discretion of the Alaska DOT&PF.
- Updates to the 20-year policy plan are made available for public comment.

NHS projects are selected and programmed by the Alaska DOT&PF using a similar, but internal, prioritization method. Exhibit 2a illustrates Alaska’s transportation planning process.

Exhibit 2a: Rural Planning Integration in Alaska



Local Elected Official Involvement

Local elected officials are encouraged to participate in the rural transportation planning process by nominating projects and providing input at Alaska DOT&PF public meetings. They may also join their advisory board for the regional transportation plan, or form coalitions to achieve specific planning objectives. Due to community sizes, mayors and managers are often directly involved in transportation planning.

2.2 Programming and Funding for Rural Area Decisions

The annual allocation of federal highway funds to Alaska is divided among three programs that make up the STIP, including highway, transit, ferry, and enhancement projects. Each program’s share of federal funding is an approximate percentage.

- *The National Highway System (NHS) – 55%*

This program funds high priority highway and ferry routes that connect major communities within and outside of Alaska. NHS projects are identified and programmed by the Alaska DOT&PF and prioritized internally. Examples include the Dalton and Seward Highways, the Port of Anchorage, and main ferry routes. The governor of Alaska has stated that NHS projects are a priority.

- *The Community Transportation Program (CTP) – 35%*

This program funds a broad range of community and rural highways, streets, and roads. CTP projects are subject to a selection criteria process and scored against each other for final prioritization. Examples include the Denali and Taylor Highways.

- *The Trails and Recreational Access for Alaska Program (TRAAK) – 10%*

This program funds bicycle/pedestrian trails and transportation-related recreational projects, such as rest areas. The TRAAK program receives funding from both federal and non-federal sources. Examples include the Anchorage coastal trail and GPS trail markers in the northern and central regions.

However, due to public input the CTP may be split into two separate programs, one for state highway projects and another for community transportation projects. This proposal is currently up for public review.

2.3 Major Planning Issues

The following major rural planning issues were identified during the workshop.

- There is a difference between regions and municipalities in the type of transportation needs they are addressing. Three levels of transportation evolution and consequent planning needs were evident at the workshop:
 - Large cities like Anchorage have an established transportation and utilities infrastructure, extended transit services, and connectivity to other cities, and their needs are to further improve upon those systems. They do not enter into dialogue because they have a separate planning process, the metropolitan planning process defined by the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), and federal regulation.
 - Medium-sized cities like Soldotna have transportation and utilities infrastructure and limited connectivity to other cities, and their needs are to develop transit services and improve their connectivity.

- Remote villages like Selawik have little, if any, transportation and utilities infrastructure, and their needs are to provide basic sanitation and health services. They cannot enter into certain dialogues because basic needs must be met first.

To better facilitate discussion, planning must be addressed separately at these levels. All sizes receive from the same funding sources despite their different needs, creating competition between regions and pitting priorities against each other. By splitting the CTP into state highways and community projects, the Alaska DOT&PF hopes to relieve some of this difference and better address local needs.

- Federal agency regulations are generally inflexible, and working on the same project with multiple federal agencies is extremely difficult and costly.

Projects that involve more than one federal agency, such as the ferry system, require that planners adhere to all sets of applicable regulations. If planners only followed the guidebook of the lead funding agency, cost and time efficiencies would be realized. Similarly, some agencies do not provide funds if a project becomes multimodal. For example, the Federal Aviation Administration will not help build a road to a remote airport if that road is used for any other purpose. Also, the Federal Transit Administration has found it difficult to provide funding for a ferry with a car deck.

- Federal funding requirements – especially design standards – are tailored toward the contiguous states, sometimes disqualifying Alaska from receiving any money despite a special design exception.

Funding requirements are often too stringent for rural Alaska, creating an all-or-nothing situation in areas with minimal transportation infrastructure. For example, two remote villages may only need a single-lane paved road with occasional pullouts to fill their needs, and not a two-lane highway. In addition, meeting safety regulations may also be too costly and unreasonable for a very low-volume connector. Flexibility in the funding requirements, or the creation of a new “frontier” classification, would enable Alaska to receive funding oriented to its needs.

- The Alaska legislature feels that too much funding is diverted to rural regions and that allocations should be based on population.

The Alaska DOT&PF prevented a measure from passing last year that would have diverted funding away from rural areas, but anticipates that it will be an issue again in the next legislative session. Many citizens in large cities such as Anchorage feel that gas tax revenue should be spent on a population formula basis, and that remote low-volume roads are not justifiable.

- Some participants felt that millions of dollars are being spent in villages on insufficient and poorly designed utilities, and that boardwalk technology needs improving.

Villages are not provided with the opportunity to select an appropriate utility system or a well-designed boardwalk. Above-ground pipes for sewer and water often interfere with local transportation systems, and sometimes do not even operate properly. In addition, water is chlorinated and not treated by reverse osmosis, as preferred by village residents. Boardwalks are often built by designers who are not familiar with conditions in northern and western Alaska. These boardwalks do not last more than a couple of seasons and are dangerous to use. Once a village's allocation has been used on the poorly designed system, it is left without funding for repairs or replacement. Groups such as Alaska Village Initiatives are lobbying state departments to consult with villages in advance about their infrastructure and to use Alaska-tested designs.

2.4 Identified Strengths and Weaknesses

The following strengths and weaknesses were identified during the workshop.

Strengths

- Alaska receives \$5-6 for every \$1 it contributes to the Surface Transportation Program, enabling it to provide transportation services to a small tax base in a large territory.
- The Alaska DOT&PF respects the rights of communities to either develop tourism or to remove themselves and take measures to prevent outside influence.
- There is strong participatory planning. Alaska DOT&PF planners regularly travel to communities to attend local transportation meetings.
- The regional transportation plans strive to achieve region-wide planning consensus on projects and provide a direct pipeline into the STIP.
- Projects in remote areas are scored using slightly different criteria so they're not at a disadvantage. For example, traffic counts are not a factor, but connectivity is. To further help scoring, rural areas may provide a match with non-cash revenue such as right-of-way or gravel.

Weaknesses

- Requirements from multiple agencies can make federal funds difficult to use.
- Communities in the unorganized borough cannot create service districts or levy taxes, even if the residents vote for such. Communities in the unorganized borough are also at a disadvantage in project prioritization due to the lack of a local government match.

- Native communities sometimes feel that they are not provided equal opportunity to communicate and work with the Alaska DOT&PF.
- Despite signing a resolution to follow a mutually agreed upon regional plan, an occasional community will lobby the legislature to give their projects higher priority.

2.5 Success Stories

- The Central Kenai Peninsula Public Transportation Task Force is an example of a grassroots, non-governmental effort to provide mobility across the region to a variety of customers. The task force is a coalition of over 50 agencies that has been meeting regularly for a year to outline a transit system for the peninsula, and also publishes a newsletter. They are currently evaluating their funding alternatives. Kodiak used the same approach, and now has a system that provides its residents with transportation to anywhere in the city for \$2.
- The Southeast Alaska Transportation Plan is an example of cooperation and consensus across numerous governmental entities. All elements of the plan were discussed and approved by local elected officials and citizens, and the entire plan itself was approved and funded by the state legislature as part of the STIP.
- The Alaska Marine Highway is an example of a vital non-highway ferry system that links communities across hundreds of miles.
- The Alaska Land Managers Forum has taken the initiative to be involved in planning, and has voluntarily agreed to make concessions in exchange for fish and wildlife protections. The forum is currently waiting to work out an agreement with the state.

3.0 Workshop Findings and Conclusions

3.1 Similarities

Workshop participants in Alaska shared few trends with the lower states in rural transportation planning. These similarities are listed below.

- Bottom-up transportation planning and public involvement processes are recent and evolving efforts. When provided the opportunity, citizens take advantage to offer input on transportation planning issues.
- Coordination at the federal, state, and local levels enhances planning, improves the quality of projects, and reduces cost.
- Rural regions must compete with metropolitan areas for money, with the department of transportation acting as arbitrator and distributor of funds.
- Communities desire the benefits of economic development – through both industry and tourism – yet strive to maintain local character.
- Both local organizations and the state look forward to the increased use of intelligent transportation systems.

3.2 Differences

Differences between Alaska and other states were also noted, which tended to center on governmental organization, regulations, and the programming process. These differences are listed below.

- While the majority of states' transportation funding is generated by the state, almost all of Alaska's funding is federal.
- Due to its unique geographic and climatic conditions, conventional transportation systems and designs are often not applicable in Alaska and construction is costly.
- The principal means of interregional travel is by small plane or boat, not car. Alaska has more airports and pilots per capita than any other state, and a ferry system that spans approximately 3,500 miles. Alaskans use commuter airlines 65 times more often than residents of the continental states.
- Alaska has one mile of road for every 42 square miles of land area, compared to the national average of one mile of road per square mile of land area. Less than 20% of Alaska's roads are paved, and almost 30% of the population is not connected by road or ferry to the continental road network.

- The contiguous states have several levels of government involved in planning, from city to county to state, while citizens in the unorganized borough of Alaska are governed directly by the state.
- Many regions in Alaska are still trying to meet basic needs, such as utilities and dirt roads, that most towns in other states satisfied 100 years ago.
- Regional planning and consensus building requires more cost and effort in Alaska. For example, coordination in a region the size of Ohio without a highway network not only necessitates more travel, but care in planning and funding.

Attachment A. Participants

Alaska

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Bill Coumbe
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David Post
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Clyde Ramoth
Mayor
Native Village of Selawik

Cheryl Richardson
Director; Transportation, Clean Air & Livable Communities
Alaska Center for the Environment

Jeff Roach
Planner, Northern Region
Alaska Dept. of Transportation and Public Facilities

David Rose
Principal
Dye Management Group, Inc.

Barbara Ruckman
Soldotna Chamber Board Representative
to Transportation Steering Committee

Tylan Schrock
Assistant City Manager
City of Seward

Cheri Smith
Women's Resource Center

Luke Smith
Manager
City of Mekoryuk

Eric Taylor
Area Plans Coordinator, Statewide Planning
Alaska Dept. of Transportation and Public Facilities

Ginny L. Tierney
City Administrator
City of Thorne Bay

John Tolley
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Dick Troeger
Kenai Peninsula Borough

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Montie G. Wade
Research Engineer, System Planning
Texas Transportation Institute

Mark Weatherstone
USOA-NRCS, Kenai Peninsula RC&D
Central Kenai Peninsula Public Transportation Task Force

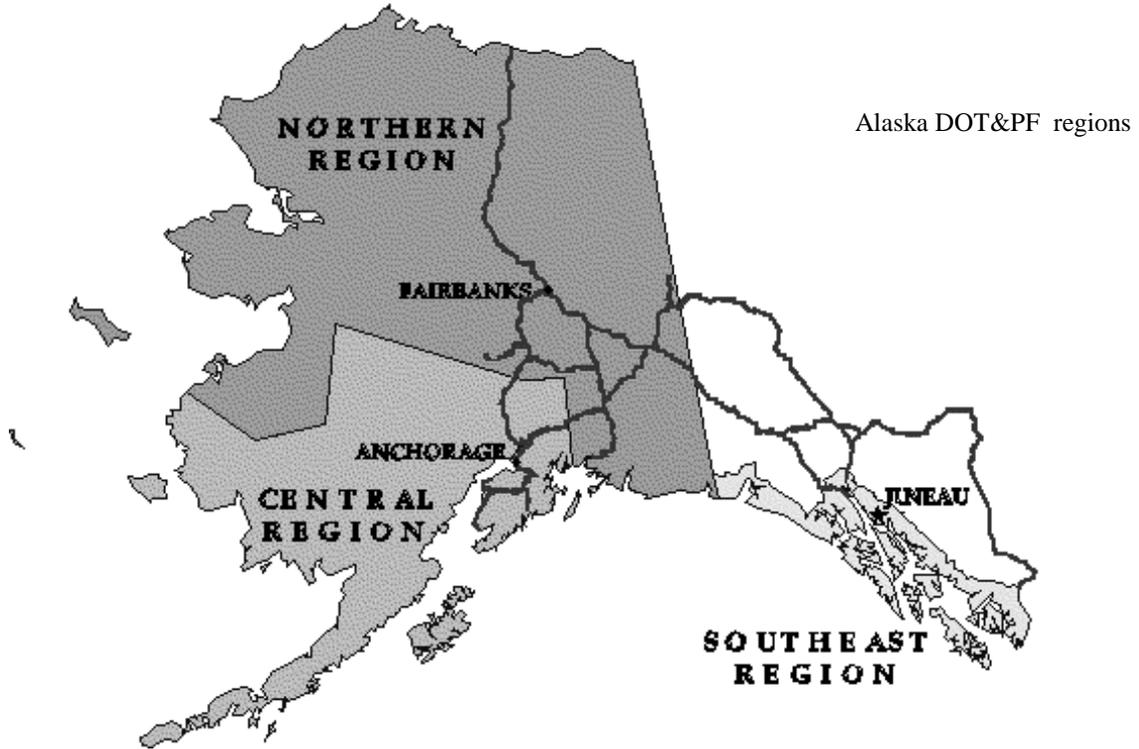
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Walt Wrede
Manager
Lake and Peninsula Borough

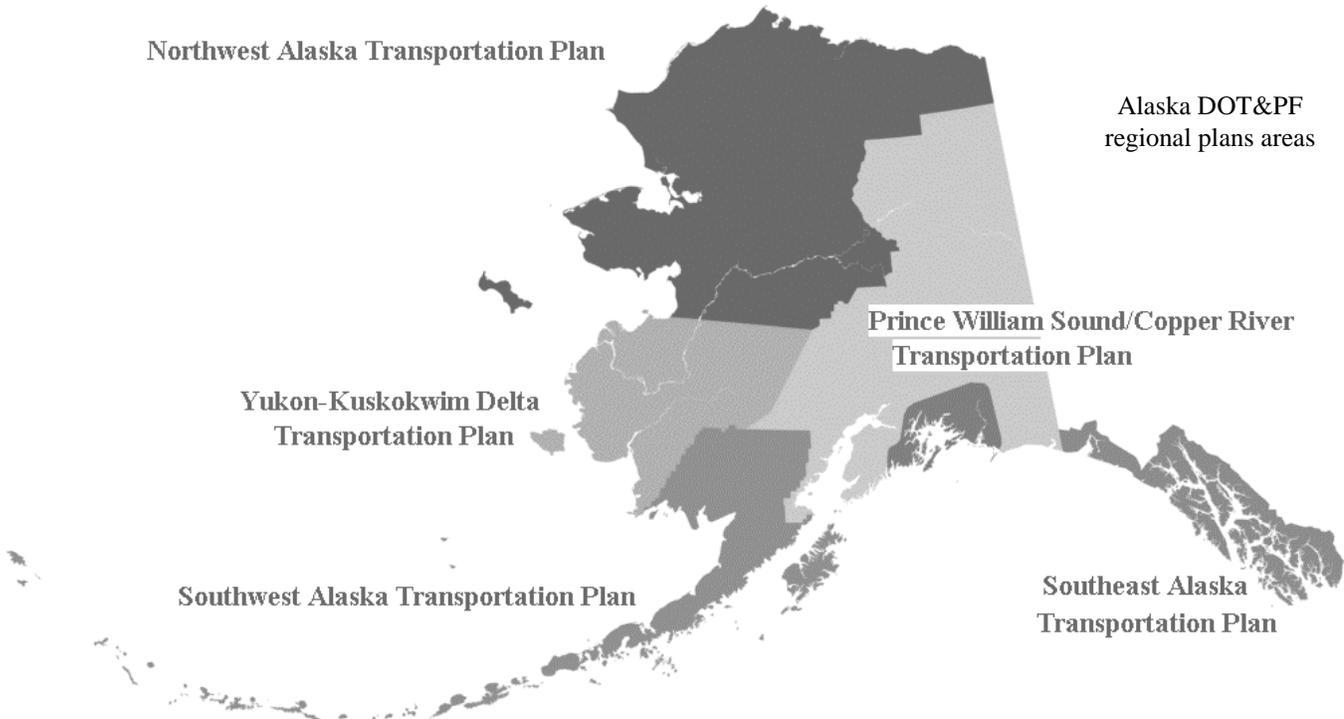
Rex Young
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Attachment B. Maps

Alaska

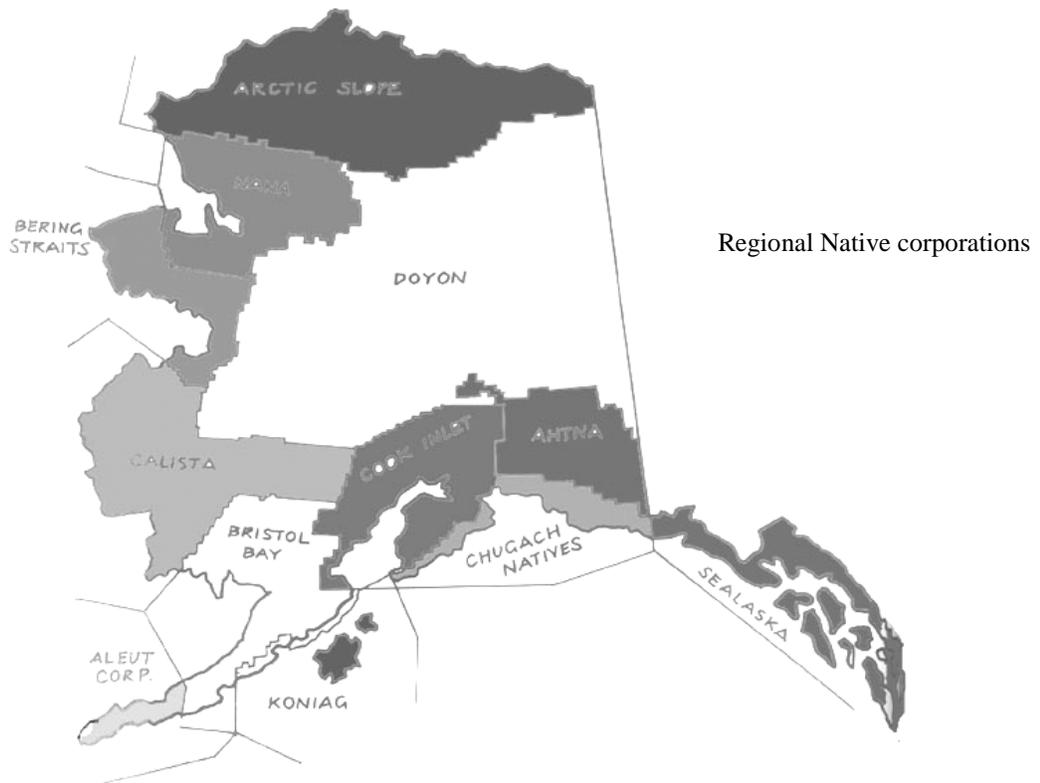
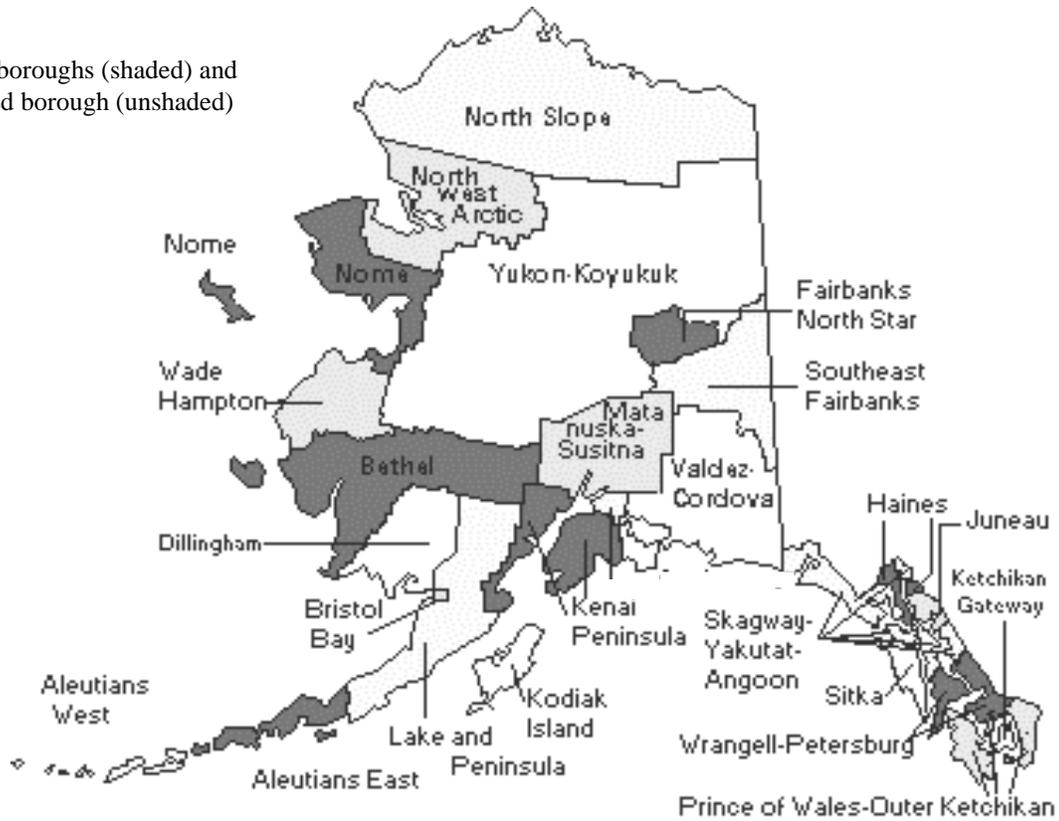


Northwest Alaska Transportation Plan

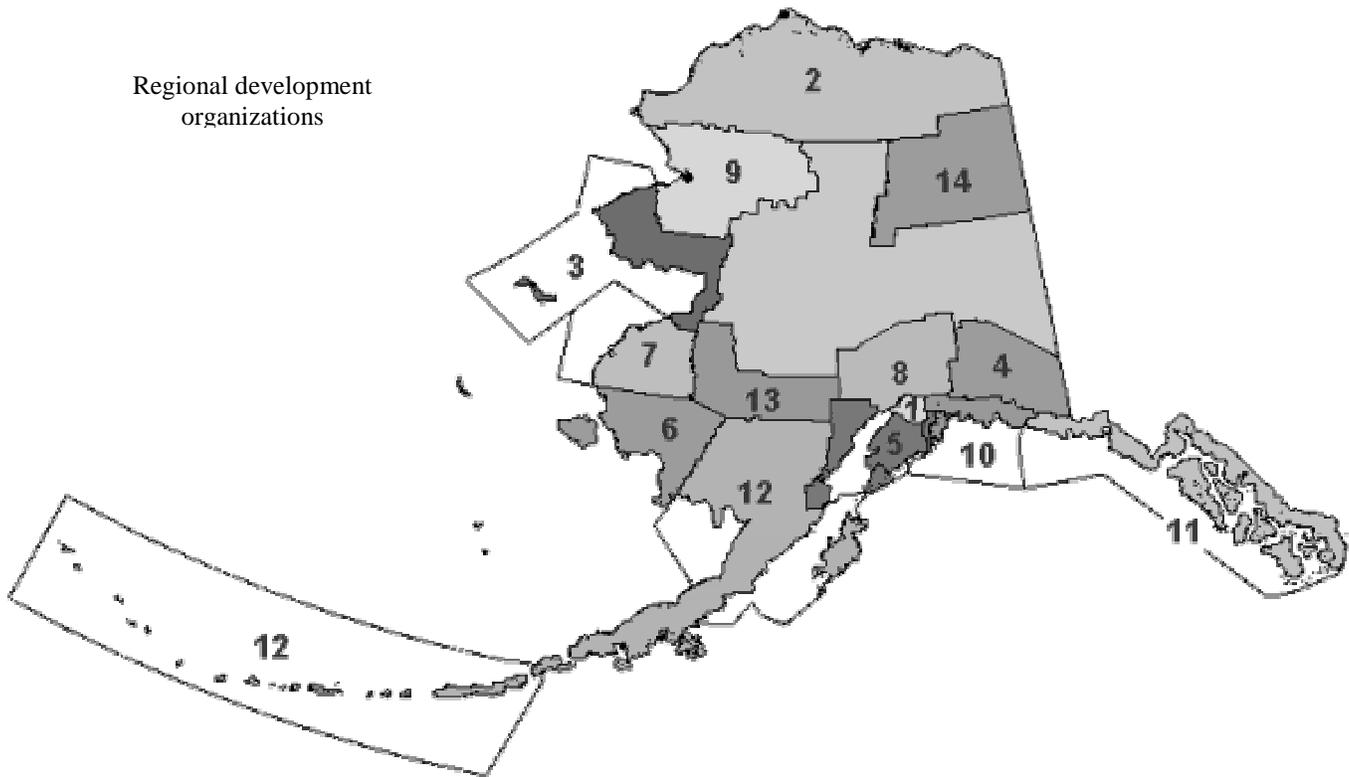


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Organized boroughs (shaded) and unorganized borough (unshaded)



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1. Anchorage Economic Development Corporation
2. Arctic Development Council
3. Bering Straits ARDOR Program
4. Copper Valley Economic Development Council
5. Kenai Peninsula Borough Economic Development District
6. Lower Kuskokwim Economic Development Council
7. Lower Yukon Economic Development Council
8. Mat-Su Resource Conservation and Development
9. Northwest Arctic Borough Economic Development Commission
10. Prince William Sound Economic Development Council
11. Southeast Alaska Conference
12. Southwest Alaska Municipal Conference

Under review:

13. Interior Rivers Resource Conservation and Development
14. Yukon Flats Resource Conservation and Development