

April 23, 2001

Testimony before House Resources Committee
RE: HB 244

I appreciate the opportunity to testify regarding HB 244. My long residence and employment in the Denali Borough gives me some perspective on the issue. I have worked at the entrance to the Park, in Kantishna for over 20 seasons, and I own personal property in the Borough. In addition, I am familiar with the Stampede trail, having skied this route in the early 1970's. Currently I am President of Denali Citizens Council, a local group of concerned citizens.

I urge you not to support this bill. My reasons are detailed below.

1. A North Access project of this scope would have immediate and long-term detrimental impacts upon the resource values of the Stampede townships and of the surrounding National Park lands. The North additions to Denali National Park were added specifically to provide habitat for large mammals, caribou, and their predators, wolves. The Stampede townships, nestled within these additions, are as important to these species as are the neighboring Park lands. The Denali Subsistence Commission, a broad based local advisory group, has come out on several occasions against the construction of either rail or road to the North of Denali as being detrimental to subsistence uses.
2. It is easy to say that "rail only access" would be environmentally friendly, but HB 244 provides no safeguards to prevent the building of a network of roads and "facilities" along the entire route of the railroad. If the sponsors of this bill are concerned that rail **only** be built, they need to provide safeguards against the use of the 3500 acres for any other transportation purpose, and provide for the return of these lands to the state if they are not used for the original project. They need to address the problem of strip development along any transportation route. This development will occur if not regulated.
3. The North Access Feasibility Study of 1997 lists tremendous costs for planning, permitting and construction of a railroad in this area (see my testimony for House Transportation). The responsibility for showing that this project is cost effective should rest with Kantishna Holdings. However we have not seen a detailed business plan, projection of costs, discussion of how revenues will meet costs or description of proposed "facilities." Has the Alaska Railroad been contacted for a competitive bid? Has the developer shown that a ride on this railroad will be affordable?
4. The State of Alaska has an Area Planning process (Tanana Basin Area Plan in this case) and provisions for "best interest findings" during land conveyances. These processes ensure that there be public input prior to a change in land use patterns. Why are these processes avoided in this bill? The stakeholders in the future of the Stampede Townships are local residents, many of whom moved to Healy and Denali with a certain rural lifestyle in mind. Their voice in this process is not optional.

5. While change is inevitable, I support comprehensive planning to avoid mistakes that are both financially and environmentally costly. In the past 20 years, visitation at Denali National Park has tripled. The pace of this change has generated problems with crowding, traffic safety and the quality of experience for tourists and locals. Although North Access advocates would like you to believe that their plan will take pressure off the Denali Park entrance, it will only bring these problems further North in a Borough where very little attention is paid to the quality of development. In my view, it is time, first, to step back and address the existing transportation and development issues along the Parks Highway.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. If any of the documents quoted in my testimony would be of interest, please contact me for references.

Sincerely,

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