

## **History of Planning in South Denali**

In general, there has been a shared vision among public land managers in the south Denali region that the south side of Denali should receive greater use and development for visitors. However, the issues related to such development have historically generated extensive public controversy.

### **The '60s and '70s: Parks Highway Proposals**

In **1968** the U.S. and Alaska Departments of Commerce proposed a facility at Chulitna Pass. That was followed by a **1969** proposal by the National Park Service and the Alaska Division of Tourism for a facility on South Curry Ridge (NPS 1969). The location at Chulitna, which is only 70 miles from the main entrance of Denali National Park, and lack of existing infrastructure at both sites made these projects unappealing to many people. Neither proposal materialized, though the designation of Denali State Park in 1970 was intended to provide the land base and protections needed for a major public tourism facility (Cresap, McCormick, and Paget; 1968).

In **1974** Alaska State Parks proposed a lodge, visitor center, park headquarters, and a downhill ski area at Byers Lake (Alaska State Parks, 1974 and 1975). This project was actually let out for competitive proposals and a contract was awarded; however, the successful bidder never seriously pursued the project.

### **The '70s: Peters Hills Proposals**

The concept of locating recreation facilities in the Peters Hills emerged from a study undertaken by the state in **1970** to explore ways to increase the role of tourism in the Alaskan economy. One of the study recommendations was the construction of a hotel in the south Denali area. Bradford Washburn, the director of the Boston Museum of Science and world renown Mount McKinley cartographer and photographer, recommended that visitor facilities be constructed at a site south of the Tokositna River (Environmental Investigation and Site Analysis – Tokositna, Denali State Park, 1980).

In **1972**, U.S. Senator Mike Gravel urged the state and the federal government to jointly study the feasibility of locating visitor facilities in the south Denali area. In **1973**, the Mount McKinley National Park master plan recommended an expansion of the park boundary to the south and a shift of visitor attention and facilities to the south side. The **1975** Denali State Park master plan recommended the addition of the Tokositna study area to the state park for the development of visitor and recreation facilities. In **1976**, the state legislature added to the state park the land that comprises the study area (Environmental Investigation and Site Analysis – Tokositna, Denali State Park, 1980).

Following these two events, State Senator Patrick Rodey and Representative Clark Gruening, with the strong support of Senator Gravel, sponsored the passage of two appropriation bills in the **1978** legislature. One bill appropriated \$310,000 to the Alaska Department of Natural Resources to investigate the feasibility of constructing a lodge and

visitor center complex at Tokositna, and the second bill appropriated \$85,000 to the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities to study access to the area. These developments led to a memorandum of understanding, signed in October 1978 by the secretary of the U.S. Department of Interior, the governor of Alaska, and the mayor of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, to jointly plan visitor facilities and programs in Denali State Park (Environmental Investigation and Site Analysis – Tokositna, Denali State Park, 1980).

In May 1979, the state legislature set up the Tokositna Special Committee, with Senator Gravel, State Senator Rodey, and Commissioner of Natural Resources Robert LeResche as members. The purpose of this committee was to provide direction for the Tokositna project. The vision for this project was a major, year-round tourism and recreation destination that included commercial lodging and a variety of other facilities and services; various outdoor recreation activities including alpine skiing; campgrounds; trailheads; an airstrip; and a Teflon dome enclosure to house many of these facilities. Four reports were produced that deal with the feasibility of developing major recreation facilities at Tokositna: 1) Environmental Investigation and Site Analysis; 2) Market Analysis and Economic Study; 3) Downhill/cross-country Ski and Outdoor Recreation Study; and 4) Transportation Study.

The Environmental Investigation and Site Analysis (1980) analyzed key environmental information about the physical aspects of the Tokositna area. The Market Analysis/Economic Feasibility Study (1979) analyzed the potential in-state and out-of-state visitor use demand. The Skiing Feasibility Analysis (1979) passed a positive judgement on the feasibility of skiing in the south Denali area: “Based upon the scope and quality of terrain the tentatively selected site compares favorably with other successful ski resorts in the U.S., Canada and Europe” (Sno Engineering 1979, p.2). Disadvantages included high development and operating costs, sensitive environmental and wilderness values, conflict with existing mining claims, and unproved technologies with regard to the Teflon dome enclosure.

### **The '80s: Site Proposals**

These studies were followed by a series of site proposals. In 1980 the Alaska Division of Parks and the NPS proposed facilities at the Tokositna site. In 1986 the Denali National Park and Preserve General Management Plan proposed cooperative state, federal, and private development of a visitor center/hotel complex on South Curry Ridge (ADNR and NPS 1986). Three years later the 1989 Denali State Park Master Plan proposed a facility for High Lake in the north end of Denali State Park (ADNR 1989; ADNR 1990).

### **The '90s**

In 1990 CIRI proposed a facility about a mile south of the Talkeetna townsite. Most proposals were rejected because they weren't accessible by road and railroad. Only two points on the main highway system in the south side area offer both railroad access and a good view of Mount McKinley – High Lake and Talkeetna. High Lake was rejected after

considerable public opposition and after it was determined to be only marginally feasible for hotel development.

In October **1990** the Senate Appropriations Committee directed the National Park Service to address visitor facility development in Talkeetna, Denali State Park, and on the south side of Denali National Park. The **1991** report in response to the directive from the Senate Committee on Appropriations concluded that the CIRI site for a Talkeetna Visitor Center would be suitable and economically feasible (DOI NPS 1991).

In **1993**, the National Park Service published a *Draft South Slope Denali Development Concept Plan/Environmental Impact Statement* that proposed two visitor centers: one in Talkeetna on CIRI-owned land, and one along the Parks Highway. The 1993 draft plan did not resolve the controversial issues, so in **1994** at the request of Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt, a Denali Task Force was established to make recommendations on, among other matters, the cooperative management and recreation development of Denali's south side. The task force submitted its final report to the National Park System Advisory Board in December 1994, and the report's recommendations for the south side were adopted by the advisory board without modification (Denali Task Force 1994).

In **1995** the Alaska Visitors Association (AVA) proposed a tram to Alder Point to access south Denali. The AVA recommended further study of a 2-stage aerial tramway at Alder Point extending from the south end of Denali State Park several miles toward, and into, Denali National Park.

In May **1995**, south side planning was reinitiated cooperatively by an intergovernmental planning team. Governor Tony Knowles directed the state to take a lead role in this cooperative effort to increase recreation and tourism opportunities on the south side of Denali. The cooperative planning team was comprised of representatives from the National Park Service, State of Alaska, Denali Borough, Matanuska-Susitna Borough, and two Native regional corporations (Ahtna, Inc., and Cook Inlet Region, Inc.). One component of this cooperative endeavor was the preparation of a *1997 South Side Development Concept Plan/Environmental Impact Statement* (DCP/EIS). The purposes of the DCP/EIS were to:

- Provide opportunities for high quality, resource-based destination experiences and provide information, orientation, and recreation services and facilities convenient to park visitors.
- Develop facilities and access in a location and manner that minimizes impacts on resources, local lifestyles, and communities.
- Establish working partnerships for funding and phasing development.
- Provide access to and a location for interpretation of the special qualities found in Denali National Park and Preserve and Denali State Park, including access to the spectacular alpine landscape on the south side of the Alaska Range.

- Offer a range of experiences and opportunities to meet the diverse needs of the traveling public, including information and orientation to the region, and new or improved recreation facilities.
- Ensure that, viewed as a whole, facilities and services benefit all visitors, including Alaska residents, independent travelers, and package tour travelers.
- Design and develop facilities and access improvements to support public use and understanding of the south side and its outstanding resources.
- Establish a research program and identify management needs to guide facility and road development.
- Facilitate orderly economic development in the region consistent with resource protection.
- Minimize and mitigate adverse effects on fish and wildlife resources, habitat, cultural resources, local rural quality of life, and existing public land and resource uses, including subsistence uses.
- Establish methods, responsibilities, and necessary steps to control unwanted secondary impacts of tourism and to minimize conflicts between different visitor groups.

In compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended, the National Park Service was the lead federal agency responsible for the DCP/EIS; the state and the two boroughs were cooperating agencies. The two Native corporations could not serve as cooperating agencies under the National Environmental Protection Act, but were considered planning partners pursuant to ANCSA (P.L. 92-203, Sec. 2(b) and in accordance with National Park Service policy and the Federal Advisory Committee Act.

The revised draft DCP/EIS was filed with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in March **1996** and the final was filed with the EPA in January **1997**. The selected alternative in the final DCP/EIS provides for enhanced access and recreational opportunities throughout the south Denali region for a variety of visitors, including Alaskans, independent travelers, and package tour travelers, while at the same time protecting the important resource and community values in the area, including the rural lifestyle of local residents. The DCP/EIS plans visitor facilities for the Tokositna area at the western edge of Denali State Park near the end of an upgraded and extended Petersville Road; in the central development zone of Denali State Park along the George Parks Highway; at Chelatna Lake; and in the Dunkle Hills.

The Record of Decision (ROD) for the DCP/EIS commits the NPS to take all practicable measures to avoid or minimize adverse environmental effects that could result from implementation of the selected action. These measures include conducting cooperative

research on the natural and cultural resources and human uses on the south side; protecting sensitive wildlife habitat and activities; protecting, to the extent practicable, wetlands and vegetation; implementing best management practices to protect water quality and surface water resources; implementing measures to reduce soil loss; implementing measures to reduce the potential for human/wildlife conflicts; protecting archeological and historic resources, as necessary; and incorporating sustainable design principles and aesthetics into facility design and siting. Adverse environmental effects also will be minimized by implementing additional land use controls prior to major development and managing recreational and other activities to protect south side resources.