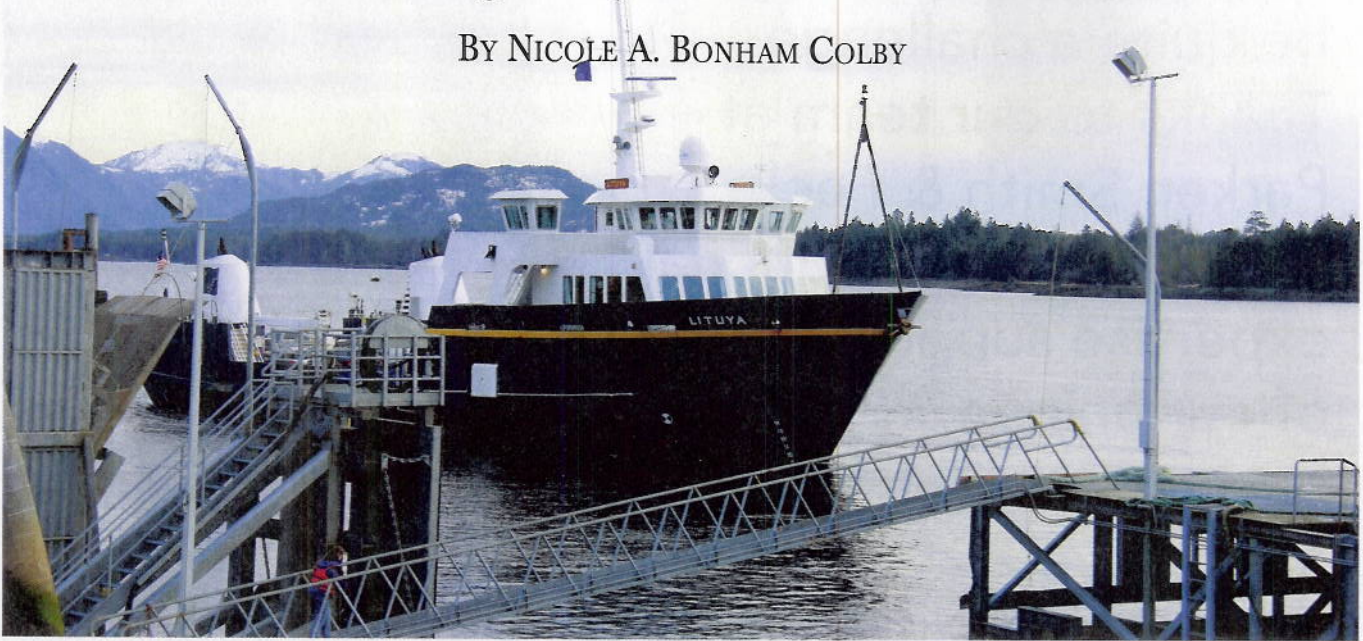


# Walden Point Road

## Increasing access for Metlakatla

BY NICOLE A. BONHAM COLBY



Photos by Kurtis R. Morin

*Alaska Marine Highway System's M/V Lituya in Ketchikan after transiting from Metlakatla. The Walden Point Road and corresponding shortened ferry route will provide Annette Island with expanded access to health services, education and commerce opportunities.*

It's been well more than a decade since Metlakatla community members first envisioned the benefits they could yield from a road project that would shorten their ferry link to nearby Ketchikan. Today, they are poised to realize those benefits: reliable access to health care, convenient secondary-educational opportunities for community youth, and expanded shopping and reciprocal commercial impact. All are on the immediate horizon, as the final touches occur to the ambitious Walden Point Road project on Annette Island in southern Southeast.

### A LONG ROAD

For former two-term Metlakatla Indian Community Mayor Sol Atkinson, who recently retired after a 30-year history of support to the tribal council, the road has been an ever-present project for much of the community's latter history. "I've been with it for 14 years," he says. "It's great to see it completed. We worked with the (U.S. Department of Defense) to have an innovative train-

ing program. They built the road as they were learning how to construct roads. From the military and federal highway (perspective), it was a massive coordination project. But it worked."

Atkinson speaks to the road's parallel function as a training project for U.S. soldiers. Under the direction of the U.S. Department of Defense, the 15-mile road connects the town of Metlakatla, pop. 1,405 according to 2010 U.S. Census, to more eastern Annette Bay, a sheltered area on the northern tip of the island offering a calmer and shorter crossing to adjacent Revillagigedeo Island and the larger commerce center of Ketchikan. Metlakatla is located on the central western side of the Annette Island and the corresponding federal reserve, the only Native reservation in Alaska.

"As far as I am concerned, it is completed," Atkinson says. All 15 miles are paved, signs are installed and railing complete. Crews are currently working to relocate the present Alaska Marine Highway ferry terminal from its Metlakatla location to a new facility at

the road's Annette Bay terminus. The result will be a much shorter, shuttle-style run for the ferry from Annette Bay to Ketchikan, offering five runs per day instead of the current two, he says.

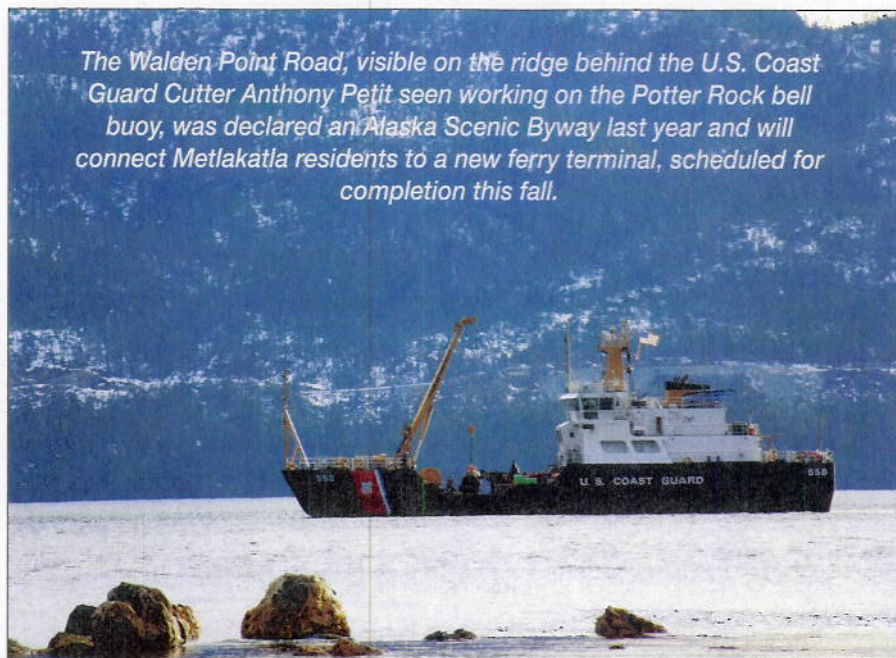
### MILITARY-SIZED CONTRIBUTION

Since the project initiated back in the late 1990s, an estimated 360 military personnel were present on-the-ground in Metlakatla from April 1 to Sept. 30 each year. Much of the financial impact from that annual infusion of personnel and support requirements, however, went to nearby Ketchikan and its array of merchants, hoteliers, restaurants and equipment vendors. "We estimated \$6 million per year was going into the Ketchikan economy for 14 years, just for (items like) heavy equipment rentals and the troops," Atkinson says. In addition to the procurement of project supplies in Ketchikan, the project also included that soldiers transited in and out of Ketchikan en route to the construction site on Annette Island, and personnel also spent their days off in the First City. "The

majority of the contribution was in Ketchikan,” affirms Atkinson.

That said, the benefit for Metlakatla going forward is considerable, according to Atkinson and Metlakatla Indian Community Councilman Byron Hayward.

“It will be a big boost to ‘Met,’” Atkinson says. “We foresaw this happening.” Currently, the M/V Lituya already carries a typically full load of vehicles and people back and forth between Metlakatla and Ketchikan on its limited schedule. Following completion of the new ferry terminal at Annette Island, the anticipated increase in daily transits and transit days will make a dramatic difference to the residents of Annette Island and visitors alike. The ferry terminal is expected to open in September or October. “With the weather improving, it will move along very fast,” Atkinson says. “Then, if students wanted to commute to the University of Alaska Southeast Ketchikan campus they could do that.” Residents from Metlakatla working in Ketchikan could similarly commute back and forth to work. “It opens up all the doors,”



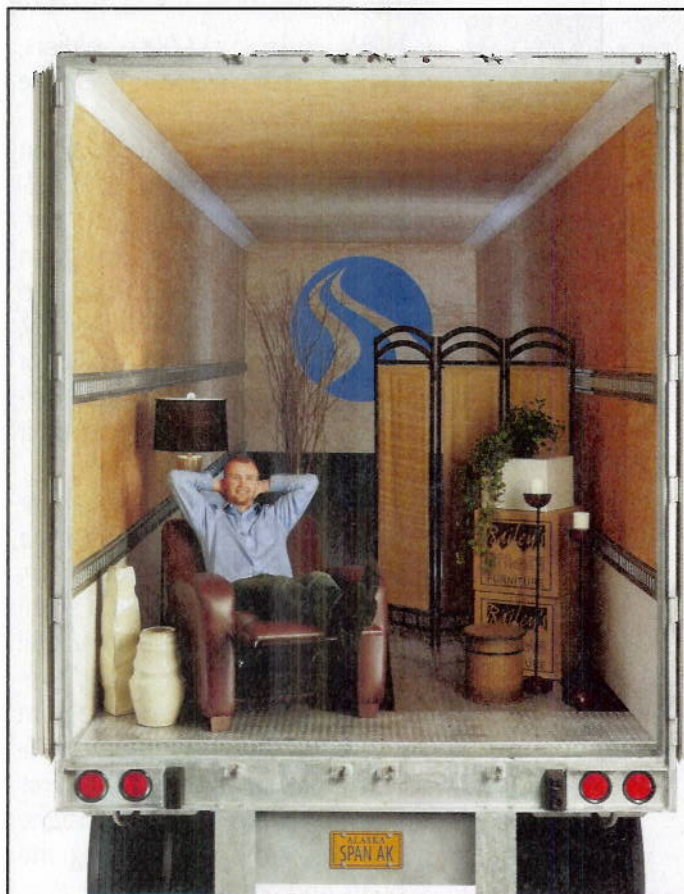
*The Walden Point Road, visible on the ridge behind the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Anthony Petit seen working on the Potter Rock bell buoy, was declared an Alaska Scenic Byway last year and will connect Metlakatla residents to a new ferry terminal, scheduled for completion this fall.*

he says. People who wish to shop in Ketchikan for the day can take their vehicle and return home the same day.

Beyond the lifestyle and convenience factors, the road and corresponding shorter ferry run offer considerable health and safety improvements. “In the winter months, we’re usually iso-

lated for three or four or five days at a time” due to rough water or storms, Atkinson says. “With that short ferry run, it will be no problem.”

Councilman Byron Hayward agrees, describing how, by positioning the community’s rescue boat at the new facility, patient transport will constitute



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a shorter run across calmer water and requiring a fraction of the time. "We're having a launch pad on that side for our rescue boat," working in collaboration with the U.S. Coast Guard, Hayward says. "It's more protected and will take 15 minutes to get over there (to Ketchikan)," he says. Altogether it will take the rescue boat approximately 30 minutes from dock to dock—a considerable improvement from the traditional method that was more subject to weather conditions and required longer transport.

As an example of the hazards of ex-

posed transport in winter conditions, the 180-foot M/V Lituya broke loose from its moorings at the ferry pier in Metlakatla during the early morning hours of Jan. 30, 2009, and grounded on Scrub Island about one mile north. Winds overnight were reported at 50 to 80 knots.

#### SEA CHANGE

Though a tertiary result—with military training and improved transportation access being first and second, respectively—the Walden Point Road will

likely serve to open up what has been a relatively isolated island community to increased public exposure. Whether by means of its very make-up as a federal reserve, or its limited ferry and air access, Annette Island has existed on its own, off to the side. Traditionally, locals have traveled off the island to Ketchikan and cities south; rather than the reverse.

However, the road may change that trend. Designation by the State of Alaska as a state scenic byway itself likely will attract a number of Alas-

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## FACTS & FIGURES

**WHO:** Joint venture among U.S. Department of Defense, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Federal Highway Administration, State of Alaska, Metlakatla Indian Community.

**WHAT:** "Operation Alaska Road," U.S. Department of Defense's Innovative Readiness Program, as a joint training for all branches of service (active, reserve and National Guard).

**WHEN:** Spanned 11 years, from 1997 to 2008.

**HOW MANY:** 13,000 soldiers, sailors, marines total over the project lifespan.

**HOW MUCH:** Military portion of the project totaled \$75 million, with an estimated 18 percent spent locally in southern Southeast for supplies, fuel, and maintenance parts. Additionally, the project contracted locally for equipment lease and many servicemen and women spent their leave time in Ketchikan.

**CURIOUS FACTS:** Included an Internet café. Soldiers transited via landing craft to/from Ketchikan. "The base camp was like a small town that opened in March/April and closed in September," recalled Dave Bich, Chief Program Division, Alaskan Command. Also, "the fact that everything was transported via boat to the island and the Army was running the boats and not the Navy!"



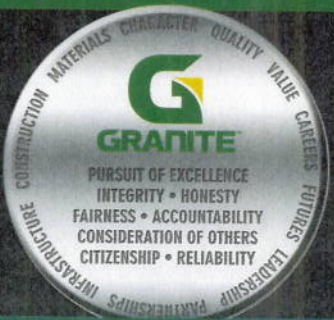
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Passengers and vehicles prepare to disembark the Alaska Marine Highway System's M/V Lituya in Ketchikan after transiting from Metlakatla. A new ferry terminal at the Annette Bay end of the Walden Point Road will shorten the trip and allow passage across protected waters.

kan and Outside visitors. The road earned the honor last year from the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTP&F), with a ribbon-cutting ceremony in August. The department released a statement at the time suggesting the "Walden Point Road has a realistic potential for being an outdoor enthusiast's utopia, particularly for hikers," and poses the potential to attract tourists and new jobs, and to incubate small businesses within the Metlakatla Indian Community.

"This region is full of rich history and culture," said DOT&PF Commissioner Marc Luiken at the time. "It also showcases the only Native reservation in Alaska. The history, natural abundance and recreational opportunities set this corridor apart and make it a unique place."

According to DOT&PF, such designation as an Alaska Scenic Byway provides resources to the local community to "create unique travel expe-

riences and enhance local quality of life through efforts to preserve, protect, interpret and promote the qualities of the designated scenic byway."

Atkinson describes some of the attributes future visitors can enjoy along the road: "We've done the official set aside, and we do have turnouts... we will put in picnic grounds, a small boat launch and campgrounds," he says.

Currently, the road is still closed off for public driving as crews complete the final touches—the terminal facility, related lighting and wiring, and the like. However, while many Metlakatla community members have lived with the road construction for a significant portion of their lives, the opportunity to use the road in everyday life is just around the bend.

"The blacktop and the rails are all in—it's drivable," says Hayward. The project has "been ongoing for about 10 years. It took a long time. It's a real nice road. It's nice to take long walks on." □