



Op/Ed Frontiersman Newspaper
By Commissioner Susan Bell

Economic Development Opportunities in the Mat-Su Valley

The State Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development (DCCED) is tasked with a wide variety of duties to support its mission to promote a healthy economy and strong communities. DCCED strives to create an environment that can grow Alaska's economy and create opportunity for residents. The agency frequently works in partnership with other agencies and organizations to develop Alaska's economic foundations: affordable energy, transportation networks, workforce development, modern communication systems, and strong local governments.

The Alaska Railroad Corporation (ARRC) is a corporate agency of DCCED. In operation since 1923, the Alaska Railroad is a full-service freight and passenger railroad linking ports and communities to Anchorage, Fairbanks, and other communities throughout Southcentral and Interior Alaska.

Two significant railroad projects will open new economic development opportunities for the businesses and residents of the Mat-Su Valley: The Port MacKenzie Rail Extension and the Northern Rail Extension.

Port MacKenzie Rail Extension

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough and the Alaska Railroad jointly proposed construction and operation of a new rail line to connect the Borough's Port MacKenzie to the existing rail system.

The port lies about 30 miles southwest of Wasilla and about 5 miles due north of Anchorage, across Cook Inlet. The selected route involves 32 miles of new rail line extending from Port MacKenzie to the Alaska Railroad's mainline just south of Houston.

Port MacKenzie has a deep draft dock that requires no dredging and can serve the world's largest ships (Panamax and Cape Class vessels). The port's 8,940 upland acres and 1,300 tideland acres provide ample room to accommodate bulk resource storage, transport, and processing facilities, as well as rail and terminal facilities for efficient train loading and unloading.

When the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), design, and construction are complete, the new rail line will operate as part of the Alaska Railroad system.

Economic Benefits:

1. The rail line will support Port MacKenzie's potential as a bulk resources export and import facilities.
2. The rail line will support natural resource development. Increased rail freight activity would benefit railbelt communities through increased employment, contributions to state and community tax base, and overall economic health.
3. With room for layout and storage, Port MacKenzie is an ideal site to supply materials for pipeline and other construction projects.

The project is scheduled for construction from 2012 through 2015, with operations starting in 2016. The project legal team submitted an opposition brief on June 27 in response to a lawsuit brought by the Alaska Survival/Cook Inlet Keeper/Sierra Club. Work on permits and right-of-way acquisition for various segments of the rail line continues, and site work is underway on the first segment nearest the port.

You can find additional information on this project at: <http://www.portmacrail.com>

Northern Rail Extension

The Alaska Railroad Corporation is working towards a new rail line between North Pole and Delta Junction. The project would involve approximately 80 miles of new rail line connecting the existing Eielson Branch rail line at the Chena River Overflow Structure to a point near Delta Junction. The proposed rail line would provide freight and potentially passenger rail services serving commercial interests and communities in or near the project corridor.

The new rail line would be operated as part of the Alaska Railroad system, available to the general public, commercial, and military shippers including agricultural and resource development businesses. The track could also support public transit operations between Fairbanks, North Pole, Salcha and Delta Junction.

Economic Benefits:

1. Improved commercial freight service for communities and businesses, including the agricultural, mining, and petrochemical sectors.
2. Safe and reliable passenger service for area residents and visitors.
3. Enhanced military access to training areas west of the Tanana River.

ARRC initiated conceptual development of the project in 2004. The Draft EIS was released in December 2008. In late 2010, Kiewit was selected as construction manager and general contractor, with Phase One construction starting in July of 2011, and an expected completion date of July 2014.

The project will move forward with final design and construction in four phases:

1. Tanana River crossing at Salcha (Joint Tanana Range Access).
2. Rail construction from Moose Creek near North Pole to the Salcha Crossing.
3. Rail construction from the Salcha crossing to the Donnelly Military Training Area.
4. Donnelly to Delta Junction.

The project team is working on permitting, and materials for construction of the bridge have arrived at the fabrication plant, and site work continues at the river. Planning for a local community project open house in August is underway.

For more information, please visit: <http://www.northernrailextension.com/>