



From Here to the Future: Transforming Anchorage/Mat-Su Transportation

Highlights from the Alaska Common Ground Series
March 22 - April 25, 2017

Introduction

Alaska Common Ground (ACG) is a non-partisan, non-profit, member supported organization with the goal of educating and engaging the public in discussion of Alaskan public policy issues. In 2016, we polled our membership for topics to explore; transportation generated the most member interest. Following discussion among the ACG board members, we decided to hold a series of events entitled: **From Here to the Future: Transforming Anchorage/Mat-Su Transportation.**

The goal of our transportation series was to present and discuss ways to improve multi-modal transportation networks within Anchorage, and between Anchorage and the Mat-Su Valley. Additionally, we wanted to focus on ways the public can become more engaged in transportation planning and envision improved transportation options for the future. This included the full range of modes of transportation - bicycles, public transportation, walking, ride sharing, and safe and faster transportation between Anchorage, Eagle River, and the Mat-Su. We wanted to tailor these discussions to our winter city environment and to include the themes of climate change and our diverse population.

We formed an impressive team to plan these events, including members of the ACG board of directors, ACG citizen members, representatives of the Municipality of Anchorage, the State Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF), the Alaska Trails organization, and the Commuter Rail group. Many others participated in our panels, including Anchorage and Mat-Su planners and citizens, transportation consulting engineers and planners, and top local and state officials.

We decided to hold a series of free public events during the Spring of 2017. We identified and interviewed innovative leaders and experts from other winter cities, and invited two to come to Anchorage to give public presentations at the Anchorage Museum Auditorium. We followed with three topical panel

discussions by local transportation experts held at the 49th State Brewing Company.

Following a tour of Anchorage that included key transportation features, Rollin Stanley, General Manager of Urban Strategy in Calgary, Canada kicked off the series on March 22 with a public lecture and discussion entitled **Technology, Demographics, and Transportation**. In addition to his presentation, Mr. Stanley met with regional DOTPF staff and appeared on the Anchorage Public Radio program “Hometown Alaska” with Anchorage Assemblyman John Weddleton and host Charles Wohlforth.

Mr. Stanley was followed on April 5 by Mayor Paul Soglin, from Madison, Wisconsin who, following a similar Anchorage tour, gave a presentation on **A Multimodal Transportation System (Winter or Not)**. Mayor Soglin also met with Mayor Berkowitz and gave a lunchtime talk to municipal transportation and land use planners while he was in town.

Three panels of local experts followed. The first panel on April 11 addressed **How does transportation planning work and how do I engage?** On April 25 panelists and audience members discussed **Anything but Cars** looking at non-motorized modes of transportation. The series finished on May 9 with a final group of policy makers from Anchorage and the Mat-Su Borough discussing with the audience how to envision and transform our region’s transportation system. These events were held at the 49th State Brewing Company restaurant where many citizens and public officials enjoyed a burger and brew while engaging in discussion.

Stantec, Bettisworth North, Brooks & Associates, and AARP Alaska financially supported our series of events. Cosponsors included the Anchorage Public Library, League of Women Voters Anchorage and Alaska, Alaska Trails, and the Municipal Vision Zero program.

All available audio, video, presentation slides, and recommended reading is linked on the Alaska Common Ground website:
<http://akcommonground.org/from-here-to-the-future-transforming-anchorage-mat-su-transportation/>.

March 22, 2017 - Technology + Demographics + Transportation. Keynote Presentation by Rollin Stanley, General Manager of Urban Strategy, Calgary, Canada

Mr. Stanley has served in urban planning and transit development roles in several parts of North America including the suburban Washington D.C. area, St Louis, and Calgary. He is an engaging speaker, part techno-geek and part visionary, with decades of putting his ideas to work. Mr. Stanley emphasized

that progressive changes to transportation requires integrative thinking about new transportation technologies and trends in urban populations and land use.

For the **long-term**, transportation initiatives require identifying dynamics in population growth, housing density, and tax revenue strategies. **Transit should spur smart growth, enhance environmental conditions, and build social equity.** It should be designed for all-purpose riders and not designed exclusively for peak service.

Land use planning, housing, and tax revenue should work with public transit. Areas around transit stops should be zoned for high density mixed use, thus increasing property value and tax revenue and supporting transit infrastructure. Walkable distances from housing to transit is critical to increasing and promoting transit use.

For the **medium-term**, transit planning should focus on frequency, boosting ridership on the most used direct routes, and developing bus apps with information on routes and wait times. More creative use must be made of vanpools, shuttles, taxi services, and car sharing, including Uber and Lyft, to bring people to transit centers.

New technologies aid in efficiency for transit systems, including payment cards for bus usage - riders can load up the card with money and swipe it to pay depending on distance and time of day. This reduces the need for coins and cash. New short-term auto rentals, such as Zipcar and Car2Go can help to reduce reliance on car ownership.

Urban design and transportation changes can promote walkable and more enticing urban spaces. Mr. Stanley noted that one-way streets in Anchorage are detrimental to restaurants and shops. **Narrowing some downtown streets** in Anchorage and expanding sidewalks would provide additional space for bikes, walkers, and outdoor dining. Stores and restaurants can enhance corridors by putting benches, chairs, and tables on the sidewalks to encourage pedestrian engagement. **Reducing parking space requirements** or eliminating it for new buildings in downtown Anchorage can encourage transit use, particularly in association with improved pedestrian amenities.

Mr. Stanley supported the direction of People Mover's new bus plan, and suggested adding a reversible lane on the Glenn Highway to the Mat-Su Borough for transit and carpools (including "slugging" - used in Washington D.C., which involves daily carpool passenger pickup locations). Mr. Stanley also suggested the now vacant former Legislative Information Office could be converted to high-density residential housing given its excellent location.

105 people attended this presentation. Video was rebroadcast on 360 North and video of Mr. Stanley's presentation and his slides are on the ACG website.

April 5, 2017 - A Multi-Modal Transportation System (Winter or Not.) Mayor Paul Soglin, Madison, Wisconsin

Mayor Soglin has served in public office over several decades and brings seasoned strategic judgment to his ideas for smart land use, lively urban places, and integrated transportation planning. He insisted that a winter climate is not an obstacle to improved transportation, using Madison as an example. Madison is both a winter city and roughly the same size as Anchorage and is without a subway or light rail system, so many of Anchorage's transportation issues are similar to Madison.

Mayor Soglin noted that **urban design must lead**, rather than follow transportation planning. **Increased building density, compactness, and mixed use serve to improve walkability and livability in urban spaces, as well as efficiency in transit.** Vast areas dedicated to surface parking, for example, are inefficient in urban centers. **Reduced surface parking**, supplemented by underground parking structures frees space for more attractive amenities. He observed that there are enough parking lots for double or triple the number of new buildings in downtown Anchorage, provided that improvements in transit are implemented.

Redevelopment and multi-modal transportation downtown brings revenue. In Madison, Tax Increment Financing (TIF) helped incentivize development where and how city officials wanted it, including former parking lots. He noted the value of focusing on mixed-use buildings - retail at street level, several floors of offices, and residential above. Incentives to take transit or other forms of transportation rather than driving can contribute to more attractive and efficient urban design.

Several practical steps were suggested to improve transportation efficiency, such as providing priority on monthly parking spaces for car poolers, using technology to post real time parking availability on a website, and providing on-street bicycle parking.

Mayor Soglin also noted that **Anchorage's downtown streets are overly wide** and that **one-way streets inhibit business development** and "kill" restaurants. He suggested partnering with UAA to give students low cost or free bus passes as part of their student fees.

130 people attend this presentation. There is no video or audio of Mayor Soglin's presentation, but his slides and his recommended list of important books on urban design are available on Alaska Common Ground's website.

April 11, 2017 Panel - “How does transportation planning work, and how do I engage?”

This first panel featured four panelists:

- **Lois Epstein** is an engineer and former Director of the Alaska Transportation Priorities Project. She is also an ACG member and a key member of the planning team for these events
- **Jennifer Witt** is a former planner with the Alaska DOTPF
- **Anne Brooks** is an engineer and the principle planner with Brooks and Associates
- **Jessica Smith** is an engineer and a transportation planner with the Mat-Su Borough
- **John Parsi**, ACG Board Member, moderated the panel

Alaska is heavily reliant on federal funds to support its transportation systems. With federal money come many federal requirements for planning, public involvement, and environmental review of design and construction. It can take ten or more years to develop a project, presenting a challenge to engage and maintain public participation. All the panelists emphasized that **it is most effective for the public to influence planning and project development early in the process**, however a good deal of public participation occurs late in the planning and design process when it is most difficult to influence plans and projects. This situation is not ideal.

Challenges to public participation include not just getting people engaged, but also stakeholder fatigue during long planning timeframes. Another obstacle is that projects, project designs and overall transportation system plans can change as local and state administrations change. One panelist noted that the Anchorage Metropolitan Area Transportation Solutions (AMATS) transportation planning body has process and structural challenges making public representation and involvement in transportation decisions more difficult than it needs to be.

It is incumbent upon planners and transportation designers to work on including public involvement throughout the lifetime of project and transportation system plan development. Websites, virtual meetings, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, online mapping and questionnaires, live streaming, and online meetings are seeing greater participation than traditional meetings.

75 people attended this panel discussion. It was audio recorded and broadcast on KSKA. Links to the audio recording and presentation slides can be found on the Alaska Common Ground website.

April 25, 2017 Panel - What We Have and What We Would Like: Public and Non-Motorized or Active Transportation

Presenters for this panel included:

- **Cynthia Wentworth**, Passenger Rail for Commuters Planning Committee
- **Steve Cleary**, Executive Director of Alaska Trails
- **Andrew Ooms**, Senior Transportation Engineer at Kittelson & Associates
- **Lindsey Hajduk**, President of Bike Anchorage
- **Taylor Brelsford**, ACG board member, moderated the panel

Cynthia Wentworth discussed passenger rail for commuters on the Alaska Railroad as an option to reduce cars and improve safety on the Glenn Highway between Anchorage and the Mat-Su Borough. There are up to 50,000 vehicles each day traveling on the Glenn Highway. She stated that **DOTPF needs to include commuter rail in its planning documents by doing a multi-modal corridor planning study**. This could include highway and rail capital and maintenance subsidies, public safety, and accident costs and commuting times by car and train in various weather conditions. This could determine whether passenger rail for commuters is more economical than bus rapid transit operating on the Glenn Highway. DOTPF and the Alaska Railroad need to improve coordination in evaluating commuter rail.

Steve Cleary discussed active transportation, which includes biking and walking. **Active transportation includes four elements: land use and mixed use, developing transportation networks, safety and access, and site design.** Goals include increased funding, expanding “complete streets” design and construction, improved safety and awareness of bikers and walkers, health benefits, trails with proximity to schools and a Safe Routes to Schools program, and continuing with the “Lets Move” initiative.

Andrew Ooms discussed the future of public transportation and on-street bike transportation in Anchorage. **Since 2011 public transportation ridership has decreased by 17%.** The new People Mover routes are designed to increase ridership in the core of Anchorage and to increase bus frequency. Transit and land use planning must work together. Increased population density increases transit ridership. Mr. Ooms noted that bus rapid transit (BRT) and dedicated bus lanes are more economical than rail. The Valley Mover privately owned bus is an example that approaches bus rapid transit.

Lindsey Hajduk is the President of Bike Anchorage, an all-volunteer organization. Its goal is to make Anchorage more bike friendly by encouraging bicycle riders, providing bicycle education, and advocating for policy level changes that support safety and public health. One example is their sponsorship of the annual Bike to Work Day. Biking in Anchorage can be dangerous, with cyclists and pedestrians making up 41% of roadway deaths. The

Municipality of Anchorage Vision Zero program has the goal of reducing and eliminating roadway deaths. The Municipality of Anchorage is also undergoing a coordinated update of its three non-motorized plans - the Bike, Trails, and Pedestrian Plans - in order to develop a comprehensive non-motorized plan that focuses on the development of a transportation network, as opposed to separate facilities in each area.

A lively discussion followed the presentations. Some key thoughts include:

- The need to build in maintenance costs when planning and funding new transportation projects.
- It is beneficial to add sidewalks to subdivisions near schools.
- To fund transportation upgrades, governments should look at increasing the gas tax and other tax strategies.
- The biggest obstacle to commuter rail is funding. Rider fees might make up some of the cost for commuter rail, but more funding would be needed from the state or federal governments.
- A multi modal corridor planning study would help identify needed funding, comparing this funding with present and future highway funding.

110 people attended this panel discussion. This event was audio recorded and broadcast on KSKA. Links to the presentation slides are available on the Alaska Common Ground website.

May 9, 2017 Panel - From Here to the Future: Policymakers Panel

The goal of this panel was to look at regional transportation visions for the future. Panelists were:

- Marc Luiken, Commissioner of the DOTPF
- Hal Hart, Planning Director for the Municipality of Anchorage
- Vern Halter, Mayor of the Mat-Su Borough
- John Parsi, ACG board member, moderated the panel

Commissioner Luiken focused on the Department's planning, funding, and public involvement processes and emphasized the importance of public engagement.

Hal Hart emphasized the importance of the new Anchorage People Mover schedule, to be implemented in fall 2017, with greater frequency in the high traffic routes. He also noted that efficient transit and higher density urban design were attractive amenities to millennials and young professionals coming to Anchorage: young people want a town that is easy to get around in. He discussed the importance of connecting land use planning to transportation planning and noted that **the 2040 Anchorage transportation plan is being**

updated and will soon go to the Planning and Zoning Commission and the Anchorage Assembly for approval. He also noted that the Spenard area of Anchorage would be seeing upgrades to its multi-modal transportation environment.

Mayor Halter described a variety of transportation improvements underway and planned in the Mat-Su Borough. He talked about commuter rail as a possible solution, especially in the winter, and commented that both commuter rail and a High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lane on the Glenn Highway merit further investigation. He noted that much of Alaska's transportation funding is federal money, and that Alaska's gas tax is the lowest in the nation at eight cents per gallon. He also noted that climate change should be taken into account in transportation planning.

During a lively session of questions and answers, there was considerable conversation on **commuter rail transportation** between Anchorage and the Mat-Su Valley. Commissioner Luiken noted that this route was in the state's Long Range Rail Plan, submitted to the Federal Railroad Administration. The Alaska Railroad is currently updating the model. On the point of partnership with the Municipality, Hal Hart noted that this remains a long-term prospect, especially since the railroad has recently lost the large accounts for coal and oil transportation. However, it is critical to continue to plan for broader use of the rail infrastructure, and commuter rail may play a part. Hal Hart suggested reinstating regular meeting between the Municipality and the Mat-Su Borough on transportation matters.

Regarding innovations, panelists acknowledged development of an HOV/bus rapid transit lane on the Glenn Highway as a promising idea.

In regard to funding, **the panelists agreed that the low level of the state gasoline tax merits a change to provide more revenue** to supplement the federal funds. This would help to provide fiscal security for maintenance of infrastructure.

80 people attended this panel discussion. The event was audio recorded and the audio and presentation slides are available on the Alaska Common Ground Website.

Recommendations

The planning team and ACG offer the following recommendations stemming from this series of transportation events and public discussion.

Citizens

- Become involved in a new transportation, urban planning, and citizen engagement initiative, the Alaska Movement project, which was sparked by Rollin Stanley's presentation. The website and blog which can be found at www.alaskamovement.com
- Plan on attending the BaconFest film festival planned for November 2018, which will feature a return visit by Rollin Stanley and films about transportation and urban development. Alaska Movement and Alaska Common Ground will sponsor this event.
- Join a municipal board or advisory committee, or attend their meetings including the AMATS Technical Advisory Committee, and the Bike and Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC).
- Participate in AMATS and municipal land use planning and comment on proposed plans and projects
- Attend community council meetings and comment on transportation and land use projects and plans during planning stages
- Visit the ACG website, www.akcommonground.org, to find video, audio, and PowerPoint slides from speakers and panelists, along with recommended reading and many other resources

Municipality of Anchorage

- Continue with implementation of the new People Mover bus plan
- Increase citizen involvement in AMATS and other land use and transportation planning and design through outreach to community councils, advisory boards and commissions, and innovative mechanisms of engagement
- Review the composition of the AMATS Technical Advisory Committee to see if it can be improved to provide better public representation
- Consider updating the Anchorage transportation website to make it more user friendly and more comprehensive. Madison, Wisconsin's transportation website can serve as a model

- Improve coordination between Anchorage and Mat-Su Borough transportation planning, including more regular meetings. It is likely that with population increases, the Mat-Su Borough will need to develop its own Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) so coordination with Anchorage will be even more important
- Focus federal transportation funds whenever possible on widely supported projects rather than expensive, controversial mega projects
- Consider a pilot project to narrow a downtown street and use the expanded space for bicycles, walking and outdoor eating and seating
- Develop a network of vanpools, car shares and employee shuttles to support the increased frequency and fewer stops of the new People Mover bus plan
- Consider a pilot project to regularly close a downtown street to cars during the evening, making a pedestrian only street
- Consider lowering the parking requirement and available parking spaces downtown to encourage non-motorized transit to and within downtown
- Reduce downtown surface areas dedicated to parking with parking garages and/or underground parking
- Encourage downtown residential development
- Plan for demographic changes
- Develop strong and safe transit, bicycling, and walking conditions and options

State of Alaska

- Investigate a pilot project for an HOV lane on the Glenn Highway and reverse it for the evening commute
- Investigate a commuter rail pilot project between Anchorage and the Mat-Su Borough by the DOTPF and the Alaska Railroad in conjunction with the Mat-Su Borough and the Municipality of Anchorage.
- Increase the state gasoline sales tax
- Give UAA students low cost or free bus passes as part of their student fees