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TOP STORY

BLM conducts listening session on Alaska Long Trail

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Apr 15, 2024

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Analyst Casey Smith (center) explains some of the points of interest on the proposed Alaska Long Trail routes.
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Dozens of Fairbanks area residents and trail enthusiasts placed sticky notes and scrawled comments on a set of maps for the proposed Alaska Long National Scenic Trail during a public listening session at the Birch Hill Recreation Area Cross-country Skiing Hall on Friday.

The listening session, hosted by the Bureau of Land Management, allowed the public to speak with BLM staff and project contractors on the latest developments and the proposed route that the 500-mile trail would take from Fairbanks to Seward. Friday's workshop is the last in a series of sessions that took place in Anchorage, Seward, Wasilla and Cantwell.

Thanks to a \$1 million appropriation from Sen. Lisa Murkowski in 2023, the BLM was tasked by Congress to conduct a three-year study on implementing the Alaska Long Trail.

"There's a lot of different landowners and interest groups, so the public listening sessions are designed to get input from folks to find out the best information we can provide to Congress," Zach Million, the BLM's project lead, said.

The study would determine whether the Long Trail can be designated a National Scenic Trail similar to the East Coast's Appalachian Trail or the West Coast's Pacific Crest Trail. The designation would feasibly help secure additional federal funding.

The potential trail uses could range from everything from hiking, trail biking, and overnight and long-distance backpacking to snowmachine use and water activities.

The feasibility study's Frequently Asked Documents section includes answers and possibilities for motorized use on certain sections of national trail system networks, developed trailheads and camping.

The nonprofit advocacy organization Alaska Trails and other groups have lobbied the Alaska Legislature for \$20.3 million in funding to help design or make Alaska Trail-related improvements to existing trails near Anchorage, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough.

The requests range from \$60,000 to \$3.5 million to design a seven-mile trail between Carlo Creek and McKinley Village.

The current fiscal year budget, which ends June 30, funds three projects worth \$1.3 million, while the previous year allocated \$4.2 million for seven projects. Trail groups requested much more and some projects were included in the final budgets each year but were vetoed by Gov. Mike Dunleavy.

The Alaska Long Trail has been a popular topic and concept for trail enthusiasts, organizations and government supporters for at least a decade, with various concepts drawn up over that period. An initial version encouraged alignment with the Trans Alaska Pipeline System, but the paths have

changed over the years.

“This has been a concept for quite a while now, but in the last few years it’s picked up a lot more momentum with support from some nonprofits,” Million said.

The proposed route includes a network of existing and proposed trail systems split into five zones. The BLM notes the proposed routes come from Alaska Trails but could change based on the feasibility study findings.

The first zone extends from Fairbanks to the Tanana River near Nenana, followed by the Denali zone from Nenana to Cantwell along the Parks Highway, from Cantwell to Anchorage with a proposed loop around Talkeetna, a fourth zone through the Anchorage Bowl and the final stretch leading to the Kenai Peninsula following the Iditarod National Historic Trail.

According to the BLM, the study and feedback will help determine “characteristics which make the proposed trail worthy of designation as a national scenic trail, as well as the feasibility, suitability, and desirability of designating the route as a national scenic trail.”

Million said feedback has ranged from huge support to concern about property rights. He added the BLM has received comments from both its in-person listening sessions and its online portal.

“We’ve heard from land management agencies and user groups and people who are private land owners in the area,” Million said. “Everybody has an interest in their own private property and that is something we want to hear about ... we are weighing everything we get and it goes into the study as input.”

The BLM plans to hold an additional series of virtual listening sessions starting in June to wrap up its initial public engagement process.

“Locals will have a say in the process and is something they can be engaged in from the start,” Million said.

The prospects of construction and additional funding are still unknown, Million said.

“That will be a big part of the study, including what the necessary easements and permissions are needed, as well as the cost of maintenance,” Million said.

Kellen Spillman, the Fairbanks North Star Borough's community planning director, was perusing some of the maps. He brought along a copy of the borough's recently overhauled comprehensive trails plan as a reference for residents and BLM staff.

Spillman called the listening sessions and community engagement a positive step for planning the Alaska Long Trail.

"To have the federal government put this type of resource and serious consideration into a trail system that is still a concept is pretty amazing," Spillman said.

The borough trail plan development included factors on how the Fairbanks/Nenana segment would integrate into local trail systems.

Spillman said that the FNSB trail plan includes plans for how to integrate the long trail into existing routes from within borough boundaries and University of Alaska Fairbanks networks.

"A fair amount of the trails already exist, such as in the Isberg Recreation Area, that can and should be utilized for the long trail," Spillman said. "We've already done a ton of research and planning on our little portion of this big concept."

Spillman said some areas, such as Isberg and Cripple Creek, could see shared use by both long trail hikers and neighborhood recreationists, but he hopes the more "urbanized areas" on the long trail plan are few.

The final decision would be up to Congress based on the BLM's conclusions.

Million, with the BLM, said the long trail could have some solid recreational and tourist benefits.

"This is a long trail if it were to be designated, could have a lot of scenic value across the state," Million said. "We're Alaskans and we enjoy our outdoors and it's an interesting concept."

Alaska Trails has strongly advocated that an Alaska Long Trail could bolster outdoor recreation and promote economic development.

The U.S. Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis's most recent data, from 2021, calculated that outdoor recreation accounted for nearly 4% of the state's gross domestic product. The percentage puts Alaska in the top five states with that amount, behind Montana, Wyoming,

Vermont and Hawaii.

Alaska outdoor recreation also grew by 14% in the U.S. in 2022, the third-highest in the nation.

Trails enthusiast James Gossell said he sees serious benefits to the long trail concept. Gossell and his wife participate in local trail marathons and hiking events. Transplants from the Lower 48, he said they have hiked parts of the Appalachian Trail

“I’m excited and I hope it’s possible,” Gossell said. “It would be cool to see some type of race from Nenana to Fairbanks on that segment.”

But planning must be done correctly for the Alaska Long Trail to be a success, he added.

“If you read some of the comments, there are people who are afraid they will push this or that without considering things like hunters, trappers or private land concerns,” Gossell said. “It’s not necessarily negative, but people want answers before it gets shoved down their throats.”

Gossell said he would like to see an Alaska Long Trail come to fruition in a way that includes consideration for both landowners and different types of trail users.

“I’d like it to be done right and have it done over 20 years than have something sloppy and in high gear pushed through,” Gossell said. “It seems the BLM is very open to getting feedback from people.”

For more information on the BLM’s feasibility study and to provide written testimony, visit <https://rb.gy/crqura>.

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