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SUSITNA HYDROELECTRIC SOCIOCULTURAL STUDIES

A C C E S S R E P O R T

Submitted to

ACRES AMERICAN INC.

by

Stephen R. Braund
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P.O. Box 1480
Anchorage, Alaska 99510

October 9, 1981



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During the interviews related to access possibilities to the Susitna Project, it became apparent that many people were viewing the map of the access routes for the first time. Generally, they felt that they did not have adequate information, they had not reviewed the feasibility studies, and they had not thought much about the problem. Consequently, many people did not feel capable of making an informed decision at that time and expressed an interest in a future public meeting related to access routes, modes, and points of entry.

Railroad Communities north of Talkeetna (Chase, Lane Creek, Curry, Sherman, and Gold Creek) [Thirty people interviewed]

Although the first preference for residents of these railroad communities is no dam the magnitude of the Susitna Project, they discussed access possibilities should the dams be constructed. Generally, residents in this region, including periodic recreational users, part-year residents (ie. six months), and more permanent year-round residents, unanimously favor the access route, point of entry, mode, and construction camp facility which will have the least environmental (both physical and human) impact in the area.

Because the vast majority of these people intentionally moved into this relatively unpopulated area to pursue a slower, simpler, wilderness life in a remote setting, they are generally opposed to industrial development, including large scale hydroelectric dams, in the local area. These people purposely settled in a relatively undeveloped area devoid of more urban services (public water, sewer, fire protection, electricity, and roads). Concomitantly, if a dam is to be

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built, the thirty people interviewed in this area unanimously preferred an access route and mode that would most effectively limit public access into the general area and have the least environmental impact on existing ecosystems.

Residents of this area perceived a railroad only access as the best mode because it appears to be the method that limits access the most. Although it means more rail traffic in their area, the people who live (either temporarily or permanently) between Talkeetna and Gold Creek prefer this alternative over the construction of any roads into the general area east of the existing railroad. Generally, these people are accustomed to the railroad as a means of entering the area and feel that it effectively retards undesirable activities which a road system promotes (increased recreationists, ATV's, 4 X 4's, roadside shooting, and vandalism). In short, residents feel that less vehicular access translates into fewer impacts on wildlife and environment in general, both local priorities.

Local residents in this subregion felt that some access from the west would likely occur given the large amounts of materials (cement and steel) required by the Devil's Canyon dam. Based on this assumption, they preferred a rail only access system. When asked if they would prefer a road from the Denali Highway only, because it would seemingly minimize impacts in their area, most of the people who live along the railroad north of Talkeetna expressed concern for the wildlife and people who lived in the Denali Highway area. Because they lacked knowledge of the Denali Highway area and because they generally associated roads with unfavorable impacts, these people favored the railroad only route from the south. In relation to this choice, they unanimously opposed any road connection from the Parks Highway to the dam site.

Thus, the residents of these railroad communities feel that the railroad gives greater control over access, limits the type of activity in the area, and tends to limit the number of people who enter the area both during and after construction. In summary, these people perceive that the rail only route is the next best thing to no access route at all. In other words, if they must accept the dam, then they favor the access system which allows the minimum amount of public access and the least amount of population and industrial growth. They feel that the railroad would lead to the minimal disruption to existing residential and recreational patterns.

Talkeetna (Twenty residents interviewed)

In Talkeetna, two factions emerged which represent different philosophies towards rural environments:

- 1) The first group is comprised of people who want to protect Talkeetna's rustic, small-town atmosphere and minimize change to the point that they are against the massive Susitna Project. These Talkeetna residents desire minimum impacts on the community as well as the wildlife and general environment of the surrounding area. They moved to Talkeetna because they value small town qualities and feel threatened by impending development. If the dam is constructed, they perceive the railroad as the best means to limit access to and change in the study area.

2) The second group includes people who tend to be pro-economic development, including the Susitna Project. People in this category are divided into two subgroups:

- a) Although they are in favor of the dam, these Talkeetna residents still value the rural, small-town atmosphere in which they have chosen to live to the point that they do not want it changed extensively by the construction of a dam. Although they enjoy a community of 400, they would not like to see Talkeetna grow to 1,000 in the near future. They also enjoy and utilize the wilderness area around Talkeetna for hunting, fishing, and other recreational activities. Because these people perceive it to have the least impact on the community and surrounding wilderness, they prefer a railroad access only to the dam sites. Talkeetna residents are familiar with the railroad, and it does not pose the threat of unlimited public access like roads. They reason that the dam could give an economic boost to the community as well as provide power to the railbelt region, while the use of rail could minimize impacts in the general area.

It should be pointed out that during access conversations, not all Talkeetna residents understood the possible ramifications of a rail only route. Not all of them were aware that such an access system may include a large parking facility in Talkeetna. This needs to be addressed at the public meeting on access. Of those who were aware of this occurrence, two groups emerged. One group changed their access preference to road from the north (either Hurricane or Denali)

to avoid Talkeetna, while the other still preferred the temporary construction impacts associated with a rail only route to the permanent impacts related to a road system. In addition, some of the impacts associated with a parking lot to accommodate the rail only access could be dispersed to locations other than Talkeetna.

- b) The second subgroup of Talkeetna residents in favor of economic development in general and the Susitna project in particular are also in favor of roads to open the country. At the extreme, these people would like to see a highway loop from the Parks Highway to Gold Creek to the dam sites and on to the Denali Highway. They tend to prefer the road access between dam sites along the south side of the river because it would open that area to both recreation and mineral extraction. For these people, public roads would maximize public access and development in the area. Ultimately, they would like to see a road connect Talkeetna and Gold Creek. Views in this category represent the minority opinion of those interviewed.

Trapper Creek (Twenty residents interviewed)

As was the case with Talkeetna, two factions, which represent different philosophies towards economic development and rural growth, emerged in Trapper Creek:

- 1) Similar to the corresponding group in Talkeetna, this group is against the Susitna project as well as other large scale development in the area. (They

prefer smaller hydroelectric projects where the potential impacts are not so great). These people find Trapper Creek a desirable rural place to live -- a small community with a wilderness setting, good hunting and fishing, near Mt. McKinley, but with road access to Anchorage or Wasilla for shopping. Generally against any roads in wilderness areas, these Trapper Creek residents fear the impacts on their community of any highway access to the dam sites, whether via Hurricane or Cantwell. Although a road which connects Hurricane to Gold Creek would seemingly have greater impacts on Trapper Creek (Trapper Creek would be less than 100 miles from the Devil's Canyon site), these residents also expressed concern about increased Parks Highway traffic should the Denali Highway access be constructed. Because it would have the least impact on their community as well as the environment in the general area, these residents preferred the railroad only route out of Gold Creek.

2) Again, similar to Talkeetna, the Trapper Creek residents who are in favor of the Susitna project are divided on the issue of access modes and routes. The following two subgroups emerged:

a) Although they are in favor of the dam, these Trapper Creek residents prefer not to see the area opened up with roads. They consider Trapper Creek a unique wilderness area with good hunting and fishing as well as relatively easy access to Anchorage. Because they prefer to minimize the impacts on their community and because they feel that the dam could be constructed without opening up the entire area with roads, they prefer the railroad only access out of Gold Creek. Residents in this subgroup are opposed to highway access from Hurricane to Gold Creek.

b) Members of this Trapper Creek subgroup tend to believe that progress (which includes hydroelectric dams, people, roads, and industrial development) will come to their area regardless of what they want. These residents prefer road access in order to provide the maximum public access to otherwise inaccessible areas. They quickly point out that Alaska has far too few roads, and they would like to gain access to areas that are currently inaccessible by road. They also argue that because eventually a road will be needed so people can utilize the area for recreation, it would be wasteful to build a railroad now and later build the inevitable road. They feel that the public should be allowed easy access to the dam sites to enjoy their recreational and visual potential. A continuous road loop from Hurricanee-Gold Creek-Devil's Canyon-Watana-Denali Highway would facilitate this goal. In Trapper Creek, this subgroup is comprised mainly of older residents who have already experienced considerable change in the area. They point out that there is no permanency with the railroad as most of the railroad towns in Alaska died.

Although it is difficult to determine the prevailing opinion related to either the dam or access route in Talkeetna and Trapper Creek (due to both the lack of a formal survey and the changing opinions as people gain new knowledge), the interviews tend to indicate that although the majority of Talkeetna residents may favor the Susitna project, they prefer the access route, mode, and point of entry which least impacts the community and the surrounding environment on a long term basis. Generally, this is perceived as a rail only route out of Gold Creek. Although a rail only route may have implications for Talkeetna related

to a large parking facility nearby (which was not adequately addressed during the interviews), most Talkeetna residents utilize the surrounding area and do not want to see permanent, year-round roads left in this region after the construction period. For these reasons, they are generally not in favor of the highway connection between Hurricane and Gold Creek. Similarly, proportionately more people in Trapper Creek seem to favor less development and less impact related to the Susitna project.

In conclusion, although the majority of residents in the southern communities of the study area (Talkeetna, Trapper Creek, Chase, Lane Creek, Curry, Sherman, and Gold Creek) do not seem to agree on whether the dam should be built, they do tend to favor a limit on public access and development in the general area. Related to this, they tend to think that a rail only access from the south would have the least impact, both during and after construction, on their communities and surrounding environment.

Cantwell (Thirty residents interviewed)

Although Cantwell residents are generally in favor of both the intertie and the Susitna Project (the people desire an electrical substation as well as distribution lines), the community is split on the issue of access via a road from the Denali Highway to the Watana site (Denali Spur). Based on the interviews in Cantwell, the following groups emerged:

1) Pro the Denali Spur. Although one portion of this group favored the construction of the Denali Spur without qualification, another segment only favored this route provided certain safeguards could be implemented.

a) Many Cantwell residents, especially local businessmen and those in search of a job, are strongly in favor of the dam, a railhead at Cantwell, the Denali Spur, and any additional development which would enhance the economic progress of the community. If roads are necessary for the construction and operation of the dams, these people are in favor of them without hesitation. In addition, if access to the dams from the Denali Highway is constructed, they feel it will increase the likelihood that the Denali Highway will be upgraded, an occurrence that would be good for the local tourist business. Also, these residents look forward to the local jobs which would be provided by the upgrade of the Denali Highway as well as the construction of the Denali Spur and Susitna dams. Based on the interviews, people in this category had a strong voice, but did not represent the majority opinion in Cantwell.

b) Members of this subgroup acknowledge that Cantwell needs the economic stimulation and electricity that may result from the Susitna Project and they appreciate the logic and engineering compatibility behind the Denali Spur, but they are very concerned about the potential adverse impacts such a road will have on the wildlife in the area (moose, caribou, bear, sheep, and fish). They fear that the Denali Spur will ruin the hunting and fishing in the area — a region that locals currently utilize.

What separates members of this group from those in the third group (see below) is that although these residents wish to protect the wildlife in the area, they feel that this could be accomplished even though the Denali Spur is constructed. For example, if this access road is only used for the dam site construction and is not opened to the public, the impact on the wildlife may not be so great. Methods local residents suggested to accomplish this goal included: provisions for no road hunting, close the road to motorized vehicles for hunting purposes, walk-in hunting only, or no hunting within one mile of the road. Without these or similar limitations, members of this group may be opposed to the Denali Spur.

In sum, these people are generally not opposed to the Susitna Project, but they do have serious concerns, centered around wildlife, with an access road from the Denali Highway. Based on the interviews, members of this group represent the majority opinion in Cantwell. But, as was the case with the communities further south, many Cantwell residents viewed the access map for the first time during the interviews. Because a community dialogue has now developed, a public meeting would be useful to identify if this is in fact the majority opinion in Cantwell as well as determine if the concerns associated with the wildlife are so great that they make the community not favor the Denali Spur.

Because many Cantwell residents would probably resist governmental limitations on the use of a road, the limited access concept has many

problems. Even those who favor this approach have serious reservations. There is a large anti-federal government feeling in Cantwell which primarily grew out of the d-2 park expansions. Related to the access question, the reasoning is circular and points out the conflicting forces at work in Cantwell which leave many residents with mixed feelings related to access. They favor the project and acknowledge the possible need for the Denali Spur. But, because they fear the impacts on the game in the area, they tend to support a limited access road. This goes against their beliefs related to public use of public roads and lands in general. If a road is constructed they want to use it as well as the surrounding countryside. Many Cantwell residents feel that there are already enough parks in the area which restrict their activities. Consequently, they have argued for a public road which defeats their goal of wildlife protection through a limited access road.

- 2) Although members of this group are not necessarily opposed to the dam either, they feel that the Denali Spur will have such an adverse impact on the wildlife and general environment in the area that they would rather see a route from the south. They are not necessarily concerned about the potential impacts on the community of Cantwell itself, but focus their attention primarily on the wildlife and fish populations in the area. They refer to how game on both sides of the Denali Highway has been hunted out by road hunters. In addition, they point out that this area is very susceptible to ATV use, and a road from the Denali Highway would lead to a huge swath where game is taken by both road hunters and ATV's.

This group, which represented the minority opinion of those interviewed, was comprised mainly of local trappers, non-locals with recreational cabins in the area, and locals who simply felt the potential adverse impact on wildlife outweighed the use of this corridor.

If the Susitna Project resulted in the construction of a Denali Spur, many Cantwell residents felt a better route off of the Denali Highway is near Butte Lake. They pointed out that there was less snow in this area (it blows away), and the Butte Lake route would, for local hunting purposes, have less impact on game. According to these residents, during the fall hunting season, there are many caribou and moose in the foothills in the vicinity where the proposed road leaves the Denali Highway. They preferred not to have this area greatly impacted by a newly constructed road.

The following generalizations pertain to the route north or south of the Susitna River between dam sites:

- In Cantwell, people who expressed an opinion on this issue were generally those who hunted or trapped in the area. These Cantwell residents tended to use the area north of the river for hunting and fishing and therefore preferred any access road or rail to be located south of the river.
- Most people in the southern communities felt inadequately informed to address this decision. Those that preferred minimum impacts in their area,

perceived the route north of the river as best, while those Talkeetna residents who desired economic development in the area preferred south of the river so that region could be developed.

Generally speaking, most of those people interviewed were opposed to a new community at the dam site. Those who wanted development desired the economic benefits to occur in their community, not in some new community. Additionally, those who wanted to limit access and change in the area, did not favor the construction of a new community in the region. Therefore, both groups tended to prefer a temporary construction camp at the site.