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Not in our backyard

August 1st 12:59 pm | By [Jillian Rogers](#) [print](#) [email](#) [link](#)

ALLAKAKET — Doug Bergman strode back and forth in the school gym in Allakaket on Friday, rubbing his hands together and thinking carefully about what he was going to say next. Before him were a few dozen residents of the small community, state and federal officials, environmentalists and consultants. They were all listening intently to his story, and all gathered in Allakaket for one reason: to discuss the proposed road from the Dalton Highway to the Ambler Mining District in the Northwest Arctic.

Bergman was one of many people who gave personal testimony opposing the project.

The 220-mile road — and, subsequently, the mine — is almost a decade off, if they're built at all. But the discussions and meetings are many, and include a myriad of stakeholders, both for and against the development.

"... It will create a scar in our land, right through it," Bergman, an Allakaket resident, said to the crowd. "An irreversible scar. Our Elders will be gone some day, and a road will be there. And I'll tell a story of what this land used to be like before the road was built. If it's built, this whole place will change."

Allakaket is one of several communities along the proposed route that have officially come out against the road. Last week's meeting was hosted by the Allakaket Tribal Council and touted as a chance for locals to speak to, and learn from, various agencies involved in the process.

Representatives from several tribes in the Interior Alaska region, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, the State of Alaska's Health and Human Services department and The Wilderness Society spoke briefly, along with various consultants involved in the project. Representatives from the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority, the company that took the project over from the State of Alaska last year, NovaCopper and engineering firm Dowl HKM were on hand to answer questions but were invited to the event just to listen. The concerns from residents are many, but at the top of the list is the potential for adverse impacts to subsistence hunting and fishing grounds.

The road — estimated to cost between \$190 and \$300 million, according to AIDEA — would be constructed over Native land, state land, Bureau of Land Management land, and through Gates of the Arctic National Preserve. It would go through, or over, creeks and streams that serve as spawning grounds and habitat for a variety of fish relied on by people of the region. It would also cross the migration path of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd



Irene Henry of Allakaket holds up her sign opposing the proposed road to Ambler. - Photo BY Jillian Rogers

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and, locals fear, disrupt moose habitat.

And with high fuel costs, and locals already having to travel farther and farther to find the game that provides their food, living a subsistence lifestyle is getting harder and harder as it is, residents said.

Cheaper gas and groceries are good, but not if traditional ways of life are sacrificed, said lifelong Allakaket resident Pollock Simon, Sr.

"Right now we're fighting to keep it the way it is," added Allakaket's Evelyn Esmailka. "Who is benefiting from all of this? It will not be us, that's for sure."

Taking stock of the benefits

Subsisting takes cash, and cash comes from employment through economic opportunities, said Walter Sampson, the vice president of NANA Regional Corporation's land and resources department.

Sampson, the only representative from the Northwest Arctic region, was at the meeting in Allakaket and spoke to the gathering about the importance of continuing to stay informed. Amid the opposition, Sampson also spoke about the potential benefits of the development.

"Communication is critical right now," Sampson said. "People need to understand that they can benefit."

Shareholders in the NANA region opposed Red Dog Mine when the idea was being talked about a few decades ago, he said. And they feared it would put an end to subsistence living.

But it provided opportunities, Sampson said. Today, of its 500 employees, 60 percent are NANA shareholders. And, Sampson added, the construction of the proposed road to Ambler and its maintenance could offer employment opportunities to Alaskans from both the NANA and Doyon regions.

The road would be a private, industrial road used to haul equipment into and product out of the mine, but, said Sampson, stipulations could be put into an agreement so that villages along the road could use it to get supplies like fuel and food into their communities.

"If they don't recognize the return, then they are not going to support it," Sampson said. "The hope is to bring the price down for products, whether it's fuel or other products. And of course, along with that, is the opportunity for the communities in maintaining the road system as possible contractors."

Officially, NANA has come out neither for nor against the project, but is in favor of the Environmental Impact Study slated to begin later this year and last up to three years. The permit application for the EIS has yet to be filed, however.

"When the environmental impact statement is done, then they can decide whether they want to support or reject what is being proposed."

The environmental statement will offer more details into the specific effects of a road and include a no-action alternative, with many meetings, decisions and reviews to take place before, during and after before any final verdict is made in regards to whether or not the project will go ahead.

Two federal agencies — the National Park Service and the Army Corps of Engineers — are the two most likely to be the lead agency on the study, though which one has not been decided yet, said John Springsteen, the infrastructure development officer with AIDEA.

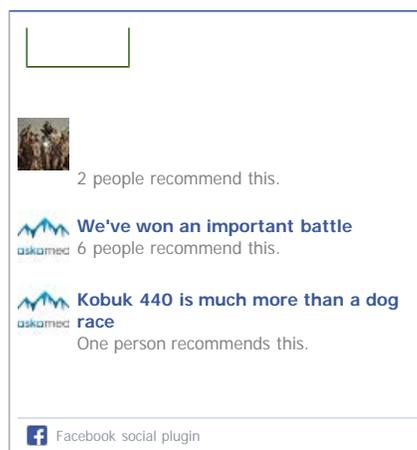
It's still so early in the process, Springsteen said, but community meetings like last week's are an important part of the procedure for all parties involved, he said.

"We've been listening and considering all the feedback we've received and making adjustments along the way on how we approach this potential project," Springsteen said. "Everyone is entitled to their opinion and it's our job to consider the input from all of the communities that would be along the corridor."

AIDEA is planning some informal meetings with various communities in the near future, along with larger all-inclusive events.

Spelling out the impact study

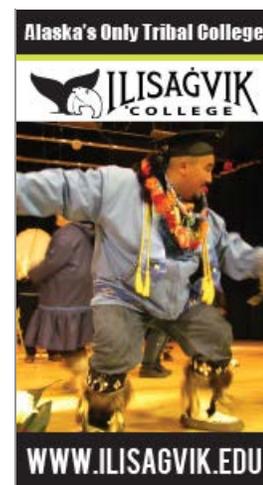
There are three possible routes the proposed road could take, one of which traverses through the northern part of the Kanuti National Wildlife



A Facebook social plugin showing recommendations for Askamed posts. At the top, there is a placeholder box for a profile picture. Below it, there are three recommended posts:

- A post with a small image of a group of people and the text "2 people recommend this."
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At the bottom of the plugin is the Facebook logo and the text "Facebook social plugin".



The logo for Alaska's Only Tribal College, ILISAGVIK COLLEGE, featuring a stylized bird and the college name. Below the logo is a photograph of a person in traditional Inuit or Alaska Native dress, performing a dance or ceremony. At the bottom of the image is the website address "WWW.ILISAGVIK.EDU".

Refuge, as well as through Gates of the Arctic.

Kanuti refuge manager Mike Spindler addressed the methods the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service uses when looking at reducing impacts through an environmental impact study.

The alternative route through the refuge was just proposed by AIDEA this spring.

In the study, the service looks at impacts to water quality, erosion, permafrost changes, air quality, noise and its effects on wildlife, water flow changes above and below ground, socioeconomic effects to the residents in the region and public use, among others.

As an example, Spindler offered a mitigation tactic of moving a wetland if the road were to go through that kind of habitat, he said.

Another important consideration, he said, is compensating for not just rivers, streams and creeks, but water that flows in sheets on top of the permafrost. Unlike the Dalton Highway, the proposed road to Ambler would run perpendicular to these watersheds.

Looking out for endangered species is a consideration, but so are invasive weeds, which can quickly take over, affecting native plants, which can thereby impact the animals that feed on them.

"It doesn't sound that threatening," he said. But one invasive species of particular interest takes over willow habitat — a staple in a moose's winter diet.

These are just a few examples of the detailed line items that can be expected in the study.

"And, of course, there's subsistence, near and dear to everybody in this room," he said. "Will the road increase competition? Will it affect the migration?"

The least environmentally impactful, most economically feasible route will be selected, which could be no route at all.

It's all about weighing out the positives and negatives, said Tobi Maracle, a consultant working with the Tanana Chiefs Conference.

"If there are a lot of costs involved with mitigations, does it still make sense?" she said.

An EIS can take years, she added. Maracle urged local residents to take part in each conversation.

"(It's) the best way to have concerns met," she said.

Getting informed and speaking up

A common thread for speakers at Friday's meeting was the urging of community members to stay informed and stay in the conversation. Various websites offer an array of information, and many more meetings are on the horizon.

"Research and data are important, but so is culture and tradition," said Victor Joseph, president of the Tanana Chiefs Conference. "Continue the dialogue and give developers a better understanding of the way of life."

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