

**Finding Of No Significant Impact
Multi-Agency Center
In Seward, Alaska**

The National Park Service (NPS) has prepared an environmental assessment (EA) on development of a multi-agency visitor and administration facility on two sites in Seward, Alaska (preferred alternative). The U.S. Forest Service will purchase a 2.4-acre site located on the corner of 3rd Avenue and Railroad Avenue from the University of Alaska. The National Park Service will purchase a 0.4-acre site located on 3rd Avenue about 1/2 block northeast of the larger parcel.

The existing 5,900 square foot K.M. Rae Building located on the 2.4-acre parcel will be rehabilitated and expanded to provide visitor services and administrative space. The building will be enlarged to approximately 29,000 square feet and configured into a two- or three-story structure. The building will contain an interpretive exhibit space, multipurpose room, long-distance learning classroom, and a refurbished auditorium. Administrative areas will consist of offices, work areas, conference/library, computer facilities, and storage.

Combined parking for the facility will contain 173 parking spaces including 5 handicap accessible spaces. This total includes 138 vehicles on the 2.4-acre site and at least 35 spaces on the 0.4-acre parcel located on 3rd Avenue. The 0.4-acre parcel will be converted to parking to accommodate government and/or Alaska SeaLife Center employee vehicles.

The purpose of the action is to provide co-located administrative and visitor facilities for both Kenai Fjords National Park and Chugach National Forest that meets the current and future needs of both agencies in a location that is visible and readily accessible to the public. The facility will improve visitor services by providing a visitor contact facility with adequate space to conduct public business and/or where visitors can become informed about the varied recreational opportunities and resources available in the region at a single unified location. The facility will also reduce agency costs by providing operating efficiencies in cooperated reception services, mailroom functions, phone system, computer system, and other necessary services combined to improve visitor service.

The development of a multi-agency visitor and administration facility in the southern end of Seward is the environmentally preferred alternative. The proposed sites provide a greater degree of environmental safety than the existing administrative offices since they are located outside of the area of high seismic risk which corresponds to the area of fractured ground damaged by the 1964 earthquake. The project sites are not within the area of wave run-up from the 1964 earthquake or area flooded in October 1986 by an intense 3-day storm.

Public Involvement

The EA had a 30-day public comment period beginning January 3, 2002 and ending February 1, 2002. Public Notice of the availability of the EA was published in the Anchorage Daily News, Seward Phoenix Log, and Kenai Peninsula Clarion. The EA was mailed to 18 agencies, organizations, and individuals. Comments were received from the Alaska Department of Fish

and Game (ADF&G), the Kenai Peninsula Borough, and the National Parks and Conservation Association (NPCA).

The ADF&G found the proposed site, within the City of Seward's central business district, to be the best alternative from the available sites. ADF&G also found that the NPS preferred alternative would not have any impact on fish and wildlife habitat. They concluded that the no-action alternative would not be in the best interest of serving the public and helping them enjoy the surrounding national park and national forest lands.

The Kenai Peninsula Borough had no objection to the proposed facilities. NPCA supported the development of a multi-agency center in Seward.

Alternatives

The EA also evaluated the no-action alternative in addition to the preferred alternative. Under the no-action alternative the Kenai Fjords National Park (KEFJ) and Chugach National Forest (CNF) would continue to use existing administrative facilities in the City of Seward. The KEFJ would maintain a visitor center and administrative building at Seward's small boat harbor while the CNF would continue to use its offices in Seward and at the Kenai Lake Work Center for administrative purposes. There would be no expansion of existing facilities.

Mitigating Measures

Mitigation to be taken in conjunction with implementing the NPS preferred alternative include:

Contaminants and hazardous substances: Groundbreaking activities (earthmoving, major landscaping, and geophysical or subsurface studies) will be visually inspected for evidence of any soil and/or groundwater contamination by pollutants, contaminants or hazardous substances. If contamination is encountered, appropriate notification and remedial action will be taken to ensure compliance with all applicable federal, state, and local government environmental statutes and regulations.

Cultural Resources: The proposed development will proceed in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended (NHPA). As lead federal agency, the NPS has initiated the Section 106 consultation process for the acquisition of the 0.4 acre parcel located on 3rd Avenue and the development of the multi-agency visitor and administration facility with the Alaska State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO). In accordance with 36 CFR 800, the NPS, in consultation with the SHPO, will identify historic properties within the Potential Area of Effect and make an assessment of adverse effect on any identified properties. See the Cultural Compliance Schedule (Appendix C) in the EA. The views of the public will be solicited and considered throughout the process. The USFS will acquire the 2.4-acre site. If historic properties are discovered or unanticipated effects on historic properties found after the completion of the Section 106 process without an agreement document, the NPS will apply the requirement of 36 CFR 800.13 (b), discoveries without prior planning. If the Section 106 process resulted in a Memorandum of Agreement, that agreement will define a process to resolve the discovery of historic properties or the unanticipated effect.

Land Use and Building Codes: The proposed development will meet all City of Seward Planning and Land Use Regulations in Chapter 15.10 of the Seward Zoning Code and the International Building Code (Seismic Zone 4). Parking for the multi-agency visitor and administrative facility will meet Seward parking guidelines for office and public assembly buildings and American Disabilities Act requirements.

Site Features: "The Line" a north-south line of large trees marking the location where a group of 26 shacks existed along Alley B in Seward will be incorporated into the project's landscape.

Environmental Consequences of the NPS Preferred Alternative

As documented in the EA, the NPS has determined the preferred alternative can be implemented with no significant adverse effect to natural resources, land use and land-use plans, parking and local transportation, cultural resources, visitor experience, and park and forest management. The environmental effects of the preferred alternative are summarized below.

The risk of potential impacts from natural hazards on humans and property at the proposed location will probably not be as great as the risk at the existing facilities. The proposed office location is not located within the area of high seismic risk, in the 100-year floodplain nor within the flood zone of the 1986 flood. The proposed site is at risk from tsunamis.

This alternative will provide more opportunities for a greater number of visitors and improve the quality of the visitor experience. The visitor experience at this location will be less related to the boat harbor and associated activities. However, its close proximity to the Alaska SeaLife Center with its focus on local marine habitats will nicely complement the experience received at the visitor center.

The preferred alternative will be consistent with the Seward Comprehensive Plan that zoned the project sites as Institutional and Central Business District. Conversion of the 0.4-acre site on 3rd Avenue to facility parking will remove a housing unit from the City of Seward's housing supply.

Vehicle parking will be expanded to meet City parking regulations. Parking for 104 vehicles needed to meet City regulations and at least an additional 34 spaces to meet peak loading. The alternative will result in an increase of about 3 percent in the average daily traffic at intersection Jefferson St. and Third Ave.

The multi-agency visitor & administration facility & associated parking will have no adverse effect on cultural resources. Development and compliance activity would follow the Cultural Compliance Schedule.

Decision

The National Park Service's and U.S. Forest Service's decision is to select the preferred alternative. The preferred alternative includes the development of a multi-agency visitor and administration facility on two sites in Seward, Alaska. The decision includes potential mitigation on contaminants and hazardous substances if any are encountered and mitigation on cultural resources, land use and building codes, and site features as identified in the FONSI.

Rationale for the Decision

A co-located administrative and visitor facilities for both Kenai Fjords National Park and Chugach National Forest will meet the current and future needs of both agencies. The multi-agency center will greatly expand visitor opportunities to obtain information about local public lands, facilities, and programs. The center will improve the efficiency of both agencies, foster better interagency coordination and communication, and provide operating efficiencies through co-operated office and visitor services. The proposed facility sites provide a greater degree of environmental safety than the existing administrative offices.

The preferred alternative complies with the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and Executive Orders 11988 and 11990. There will be no significant restriction of subsistence activities as documented by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Title VIII, Section 810 (a) Summary Evaluation and Findings.

The project is located outside Kenai Fjords National Park and will not result in any environmental impacts to park resources and values and thus will not violate the NPS Organic Act.

I find that the preferred alternative does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1508.9), an environmental impact statement will not be prepared for the project.

Approved: Ralph H. Tunney 2/20/02
acting NPS, Regional Director, Alaska Date

Approved: Steve R. Hill 2/20/02
Forest Supervisor, Chugach National Forest Date