

DENALI COMMISSION MEETING

via ZOOM videoconference:
Anchorage, Alaska

February 14, 2022

MEETING MINUTES

PRESENT:

Commissioners

Garrett Boyle, Federal Co-Chair of the Denali Commission
Joelle Hall, Commissioner
Julie Kitka, Commissioner
Nils Andreassen, Commissioner

Absent:

Alicia Amberg, Commissioner
Tyson Gallagher, Commissioner
Pat Pitney, Commissioner

Staff/Others

Jocelyn Fenton, Director of Programs
Erik O'Brien, Community and Economic Development Program Manager
Janet Davis, Grants Officer
Liza Mack, Village Infrastructure & Transportation Program Manager
Katie Conway, Energy Program Manager
Anne Stanislawski, Administrative Officer
Raina Thiele, U.S. Department of Interior
Betty Caudle, Kron Associates

CALL TO ORDER

Federal Co-Chair Garrett Boyle called the meeting to order at 9:35 a.m. He introduced Raina Thiele, Senior Advisor for Alaskan Affairs and Strategic Priorities, commissioners and staff on the conference call.

PRESENTATION ON INFRASTRUCTURE FUNDING

After introductions, Federal Co-Chair Boyle thanked Ms. Thiele for being here today. Then he turned the meeting over to Ms. Thiele for her presentation.

Ms. Thiele expressed her thanks for being invited to speak to everyone today. As Garrett mentioned she works for Secretary Deb Haaland as her Senior Advisor for Alaska Affairs and

Strategic Priorities. Just to give some personal background, she was born and raised across Alaska. She is originally from Bristol Bay, she grew up on the Kenai Peninsula, all over the place and is Athabaskan Inupiaq. While she has been living back and forth between Washington D.C. and Alaska for quite a long time, the last few years she has lived mainly in D.C.

She is here today to talk a little bit about the infrastructure bill, which has been all hands-on deck for Department of the Interior (DOI) staff with planning for implementation of this very large amount of funding. What Secretary Haaland and staff have been thinking through is where do we want to focus. They have quite a bit of flexibility on where to use the funds. Today's conversation is very timely because they are currently preparing a spend plan for submission to Congress the next day.

She would like to highlight a few items DOI is looking at specifically for the infrastructure bill. Compared to some of the other agencies, such as Department of Transportation and Department of Energy, the DOI's budget from this bill is relatively small. However, they do see this as an opportunity to fund programs that will have positive impacts for communities in Alaska and across the nation.

OVERVIEW

One critical investment is in our climate infrastructure to ensure a healthy planet for current and future generations while creating jobs and advancing environmental justice. Secretary Haaland is focused on cleaning up toxic pollutions, conserving habitats, protecting communities from impacts caused by drought, and wildfires. These are things that are becoming increasingly common and increasingly severe as we go along. We are also focused on underserved communities across the nation, as well as tribal communities. Specifically for Alaska. Ms. Thiele has been working with Winnie Stachelberg, DOI infrastructure coordinator for the entire department, on what can DOI provide to Alaska with the programs we will be implementing.

IMPLEMENTATION

Ms. Thiele hopes that over the next couple of months, we'll be able to put together a package from the DOI that can explain to folks across Alaska what our investments will be and how communities can access these resources. This may mean a streamlined application process for communities or ensuring they have the capacity to apply for this kind of funding.

Our agency colleagues, such as USDA, are putting together strike teams to help them implement their dollars. They will streamline and provide technical assistance to small communities that don't have the ability to take on these massive grant applications. DOI wants to do the same thing to make the application process easier for smaller communities that may not have the ability to go through a lengthy grant application process.

PROGRAM FUNDS

Ms. Thiele proceeded to run through a couple of highlighted items that may be of interest to this group and then focused more in-depth on a couple of the items, such as climate funding in particular. She has already been discussing this with Garrett, the White House, and other partner agencies to have more impact for communities on the front line of climate change, who don't

have resources that they need to relocate and build facilities to make their community safer. To date, we have designated the following:

- \$8.3 billion for water and drought resilience. For example, WaterSmart program grants for our water project; dam safety; and, water efficiency and recycling programs.
- \$1.5 billion in wildfire resilience. Exciting to her because of the wildfires that Alaska has had over the past few years. This money can be used to restore ecosystems, post-wildfire restoration activities across federal lands, national parks, forests, grasslands. Also investing in federal fire fighter programs.
- \$1.4 billion in ecosystem restoration and resilience.
- \$466 million in tribal climate resilience, in infrastructure and \$216 million specifically for relocation and resilience.

COMMUNITY RELOCATION DUE TO EROSION

Concerning community relocation, Ms. Thiele stated that we have two different approaches with infrastructure bill resources. First is to invest deeply in a small number of communities. Especially ones that are ready to relocate. They have plans in place and community buy-in to take that pathway. Second is to take the funds and sprinkle them across many communities.

As we've talked through this with DOI staff and with our White House colleagues, we've realized that various agencies have different pots of money that we can all coordinate around in order to get specific communities relocated or get them working towards relocation. Hopefully, that will be our approach.

We are in the middle of the policy making process. And we're pulling together several interagency colleagues. The Denali Commission will be a significant part of this conversation to determine who can build roads, who can build homes, how do we ensure the permitting processes are as streamlined as possible. We've heard the stories, such as Kivalina, who had to spend millions of dollars for the permitting process. Most communities can't overcome this type of roadblock. We have seen communities languish in the process of trying to relocate.

So, how do we bring the interagencies together to work towards capacity, development, planning process, and so on. From DOI's perspective, we're the capacity builders and provide planning assistance folks. We can do some building as well but would rather rely on our interagency colleagues. And Department of Defense has stepped up to the conversation so they can bring their resources and their authority to bear as well.

We're excited about this and would love to see some real movement for relocations by the end of this administration through coordination with the State of Alaska, the Denali Commission and our interagency partners. While this conversation is still new, we're confident we can make it happen. We just need to make sure we have everyone on board. We have strong support from the White House. With their convening abilities, they can help us move forward, as it isn't just one entity involved. We want program coordination and communication run out of Alaska, while we get the federal family side to effectively engage with Alaska and our communities to make real progress.

CONTAMINATION CLEAN-UP

Ms. Thiele stated that another investment is \$16 billion in legacy contamination cleanup. This will mostly involve abandoned mine lands, which may involve a larger conversation around Native lands and how we begin to address some of these issues in Alaska. We see a huge issue impacting communities and subsistent resources. Ms. Thiele has been speaking with DOI interagency partners and White House colleagues to make progress on pushing these issues forward. We know they are a priority for Alaska communities, State of Alaska, our Congressional Delegation and federal family. DOI hopes that with their additional resources and the flexibility they include, we can make progress on contaminated sites in State of Alaska.

Q&A SESSION

Ms. Thiele asked if any of the Commissioners had any questions. She added that today's talk is a broad overview, and she may not have all the answers yet. But she'd be happy to try.

Commissioner Hall asked if this process is competitive or list based. How do we get the funds to imperiled communities? For example, if a village is ready to move, do they have to compete for the funds to do so.

Ms. Thiele responded that the funding process is not competitive. DOI doesn't have the capacity to turn applications around quickly. They are hoping that this will be a pilot program where they select a set number of communities who meet the criteria of risk factors, they have land available for a new location, community buy-in and so on. The community is willing to work with interagencies and the state to get this done. That is the hope.

Commissioner Kitka thanked Ms. Thiele, for joining us on this. She sees a lot of pitfalls in what Ms. Thiele has outlined and Julie hopes we can create ways forward that make sense. At the end of the Obama Administration, while we were successful in designating Denali Commission as the federal agency on village relocation, we were unable to load up any resources to do it. Commissioner Kitka asked Ms. Thiele what her view is on the role of the Denali Commission in this.

Secondly, Commissioner Kitka stated that the Harvard Reservation Economies Report that came out recently, outlined the disparities in funding that came out in CARES and ARP and stuff. How will you take that into account to protect our small communities against 20-30 tribes across the nation scooping up most of this money.

Commissioner Kitka added that dealing with the Denali Commission's role and how well the designation holds will make a difference on how much effort people want to put into it versus someone running it from D.C. or the State or what have you. We're very, very excited about what's happening and commend the Biden Administration and Congress for putting this historic level of funding out there. The pathway to access these funds and who will make decisions are critically important.

Ms. Thiele responded that Julie is absolutely right. We need to make sure this effort is driven in Alaska and not in D.C. She has been pushing this point forward in her many conversations with

agency colleagues and White House staff. In her experience, what looks good on paper can quickly become messy when implemented. Her goal, and the Secretary agrees with her, is to embed as much of this effort in Alaska as possible. And she hopes the Denali Commission will have a key role.

From her conversations with Garrett, she knows the Denali Commission is ready to step into that role and be as essential as possible. Especially given that the Commission has these great relationships with both our federal family and across the state as well. We're going to need all sides of the funding options on the table to help us out.

Concerning Commissioner Kitka's second question about ensuring that smaller communities get their fair share of the funds, Ms. Thiele stated that DOI is focused on that with spending plan talks about how tribes should receive equitable amounts of this resource. It's always a struggle to make sure smaller communities have capacity and are able to access this money through the application process. How do we help the lower capacity tribes, villages, and communities that are underserved push forward with their applications or be able to engage with programs that we already have. We are looking at USDA's strike force model as a possibility.

Commissioner Kitka shared that the Alaska State Legislature is on cusp of passing a bill for tribal recognition. It should pass out of Senate State Affairs committee tomorrow, possibly waived out of Community Regional Affairs committee, and be on Senate floor on Wednesday. This is an amazing step forward from State of Alaska in recognizing and showing respect to our tribes. It will build trust and open up opportunities for collaboration for all of this. She just wanted Ms. Thiele to know that.

Second we had an opportunity talk with Mitch Landrieu, White House Infrastructure Czar, and requested that he come to Alaska to see the uniqueness of our state, and also asked for a sit-down meeting with him and Brian Deese to talk about a unique strategy and plan for Alaska, given that we're 1/5th the size of the United States, geographically. In addition, we have such a large number of federally recognized tribes. He said there's no daylight between him and Brian on this. He thought it was a good idea to have a meeting. So, anything Ms. Thiele can do to make that happen would be great. Julie has talked to the Governor's office, who's willing to sign a joint letter requesting this meeting. She's also talked to our Congressional Delegation about joining the meeting.

Commissioner Kitka believes we need a separate Alaska plan on this infrastructure. We need to open up a path for the Governor, our Congressional Delegation, AFN and others to sit down and figure out what is something that would be really meaningful to make it easier with these agencies, as opposed to looking at a year of just negotiations of national formulas to make their case.

We have found, as Ms. Thiele is aware, so many people in DC, in key decision-making positions, who don't understand what it's like up here. For example, concerning relocation of a village, one official said not to worry on the relocation. He talked to the Mayor and there's plenty of hotel rooms. So, if we need to evacuate, we can relocate them there.

Commissioner Kitka stated they're good people in DC, but they don't have an understanding about our challenges. We do need to have an Alaska overarching plan and meeting of the minds on this to be as efficient as we can. You guys have so many responsibilities with all the other tribes and other states on public land issues and so forth. It would be nice to carve out a separate Alaska Plan. Ms. Thiele responded that tribal recognition is very exciting to hear about, and she will follow that through the Alaska State Legislature. She hopes that it's successful.

Ms. Thiele added that concerning the Brian and Mitch meeting, she thinks that is a great idea. She is happy to bring in other folks as well, such as Winnie from DOI, to help push this forward. We've talked a lot about how many agencies, including the White House, are working on Alaska. She has been trying to map out where would it make the most sense for that convening activity to take place. Part of the discussion has been through our executive steering committee. We're open to ideas. She agrees that we do need to have an Alaska-specific plan. She has been pushing for that with the DOI, but we haven't gotten there yet. Senator Murkowski has been asking for briefings. That will happen in the next few weeks. So, hopefully, we'll soon have a sense of what is going to Alaska.

Commissioner Kitka extended her thanks to Raina and added that she is in a key position. She asked Ms. Thiele to convey our best wishes to Secretary Haaland and tell her to hurry up and come up for a visit. Ms. Thiele responded that Secretary Haaland is planning to be in Alaska April 18th. She will pass on Julie's message to her.

Commissioner Andreassen asked if the department's thinking about some intentional grant making to communities outside of competitive process. If so, please let groups know what funding is off the table so we're not competing for something that's not there. His organization is standing up grant writing support for various communities. He doesn't want them to think an opportunity for a grant is there, when it's really not. He asked if there's a way to stay in touch on what funds are available to avoid conflict.

Ms. Thiele responded that she will work to keep organizations up to date. She and Winnie have a phone call with Commissioner Andreassen coming up in a few weeks to resolve some of the conflicts. Because DOIs spend plans are not yet highly specific, it's important to have input on where to focus the funds. Input from Commissioners is welcome. She is available to have conversations with commissioners and anyone else on the infrastructure and the DOI plans. Best way to keep in touch is over email and phone. As our plans shape up, we're happy to share those to make sure folks aren't spinning their wheels on funds that may not be there.

Garrett Boyle stated that the Commissioners have agreed to invest \$5 million from our infrastructure bill money into our Village Infrastructure Protection Program. So, this will be something that that we'll continue to be heavily involved with going forward. And we look forward to partnering with Interior and every other agency that we can to make sure this works well.

Ms. Thiele thanked the Commissioners for their time.

Federal Co-Chair Boyle concluded the meeting at 10:03 a.m.