Denali Park Passenger Train Turnaround Track

PROJECT FACTS

Project Scope

The Alaska Railroad (ARRC) proposes to re-establish a turnaround track to allow trains to turn around at Denali National Park (ARRC Milepost 347), which is currently not possible. The old turnaround track easement is inadequate for modern use and is now part of the Denali Park Visitor Center. A replacement is needed to afford more efficient and flexible rail transportation options for park visitors. The railroad envisions a turnaround track (either a "loop" or a "wye") that can accommodate 2,500-foot-long passenger trains.

ARRC proposes to exchange a small parcel of railroad land on the west side of the track, adjacent to Denali National Park Wilderness. In return, the National Park Service (NPS) would provide equal acreage from Denali National Park land on the east side of the track. The exchange would involve less than 25 acres, with ARRC land becoming Denali Park Wilderness, and NPS land becoming ARRC right-of-way.

Benefits

Rail passenger growth is projected to continue to the popular Denali Park destination. In 2009, more than 265,000 passengers used the Denali Park Rail Station. Passenger trains average 20 coaches carrying up to 1,500 passengers. The platform at Denali Park cannot accommodate longer passenger trains, so growth in rail visitors will require more, as opposed to longer, trains.

Prior to 2005, all trains operating through Denali Park continued on to Anchorage or Fairbanks. In 2005, a new train service provided direct transport between Whittier and Denali. This service accommodated 22,367 passengers in 2005, and that number grew to 27,876 in 2009 for a 25% increase in ridership. These passenger trains must continue on to Fairbanks to be serviced and to turn around.

The Alaska Railroad's Denali Park Rail Station.

The addition of a turnaround track would accommodate continued growth and development of rail access to Denali Park. Rail access is considered preferable to a highway alternative, because of improved public safety, less traffic congestion and less environmental impact.

A turnaround track will eventually lead to enhanced visitor options to access Denali Park, because rail schedules can become more frequent and flexible. Additional passengers will help the railroad generate additional funds that can be invested back into railroad passenger customer service and infrastructure improvements.

Status

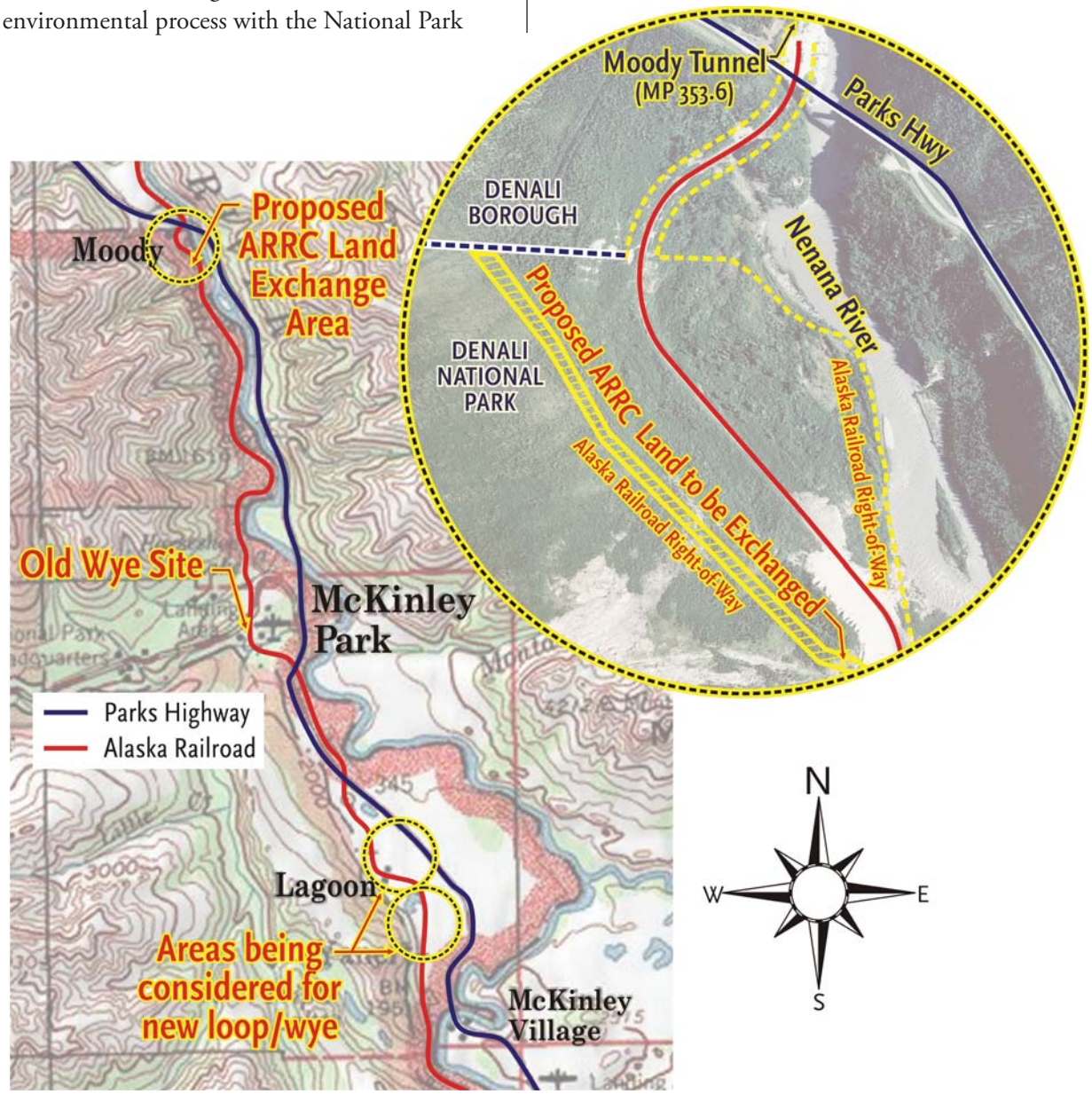
In 2007, the ARRC Engineering Department drafted a conceptual project design outlining proposed land exchange areas and a loop configuration for the turnaround track. Conceptual engineering provided the basis for requesting a land exchange and initiating legislative action.

The exchange of federal park land requires the approval of the United States Congress. Likewise, disposition (sale, transfer, exchange, donation, etc.) of Alaska Railroad land requires the approval of the Alaska State Legislature.

Alaska Representative Don Young introduced legislation in February 2007 to authorize the park/railroad land exchange to support a new

turnaround track. Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski introduced companion legislation in the U.S. Senate. The bill passed the U.S. House in 2007 and the U.S. Senate in 2008. It was signed into law in May 2008.

Once an environmental evaluation is complete, the Alaska Railroad will seek land exchange approval from the Alaska State Legislature. ARRC has initiated the environmental process with the National Park Service in order meet National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements. As the lead federal agency, the NPS will oversee preparation of the environmental document, which will include a description of the alternatives considered and identify a proposed altenative.



Project Costs

The land exchange involves equal acreage from each party, so that there would be no further financial obligation on the part of either the National Park Service or the Alaska Railroad. The cost of land surveys, environmental work, preliminary and final design and construction is estimated to cost between $2 and $3 million, funded 100% by the Alaska Railroad. ARRC funded $20,000 in 2007 and $38,000 in 2008 to initiate conceptual engineering and environmental work.