

# DON'T GIVE UP

## DILLINGHAM'S PEDESTRIAN/BIKE PATH

*"It was the community. We couldn't have done it on our own."*

*-Lois Sorensen*

*Pedestrian Bike Path Coalition*

Dillingham is one of a few communities off the main Alaska road system with a paved pedestrian/bike path. This is a story of how this community “came alive” overnight to fight for the inclusion of the bike path in a road paving project. It is also the story of how the community “came alive” with activity once the bike path was completed. The path is a safe, year-round place for all members of the community to exercise, play and socialize.

Prior to fall of 1998 a few die-hard Dillingham residents regularly walked, jogged or rode bikes for recreation and exercise. If they did, more often than not, they shared a bumpy, muddy trail with four-wheelers and snow machines. One such trail paralleled two and half miles of the road that connects Dillingham with Aleknagik.

Early in 1998, users of this old trail learned of State plans to pave the Aleknagik Lake Road that summer. They spread the word to others interested in walking and biking and seized the opportunity at Planning Committee hearings to encourage the City to include a paved trail as part of the project. In March, the City of Dillingham requested funds from the Aleknagik Lake Road project be appropriated for a pedestrian/bike path alongside the road. The City ear-marked funds up to \$300,000 for the project. The Alaska Department of Transportation (DOT) gave a “thumbs up” to the project upon hearing that the City of Dillingham passed the resolution.

In June, three months after the city passed the resolution, residents watched as road construction began. Walkers and joggers no longer had access to the old trail, but they felt it was only a temporary inconvenience. They were sure that in a few months their new paved path would be ready.

Suddenly, word spread from the city administration that there were no longer plans for the inclusion of the pedestrian path in the project. Residents were shocked. Not only were they not going to get a paved pedestrian bike path, but the old “home-grown” trail was being destroyed.

The community did not give up, even though project completion was just a month or two away. The Mayor, City Manager and some interested residents met with representatives of DOT and the contractors. City officials helped locate copies of policy statements that Governor Tony Knowles and the Commissioner of DOT issued three years earlier. On June 5, 1995 the Governor had established the following policy:

“It is the policy of this Administration that accommodations for both bicyclists and pedestrians shall be included in the design for all projects, including those under construction, where reasonably possible, and shall be constructed where economically feasible. This means pedestrians and bicycle facilities will often be more successful when separated from the road and buffered by vegetation.”

## Coalition Comments

*"I have a 10 year old son who is riding his bike constantly. First we found out the road was going to have no room to walk or run. Then they said, 'It's too late. Too bad.' We thought that was out of line. Four or five of us got together and we hit town hard and got a massive number of names on the petition in under a week."*

*-Teresa Duncan*

*"Our original focus was safety—we were watching kids on their bikes nearly getting wiped out every day and cars not paying attention. And that continues to be true where there is no place that kids can walk and ride safely."*

*-Cristy Tilden*

*"I had a pretty full plate with two small children and Grandma in a wheel chair. But the girls called so I mailed postcards and worked on the petitions. In a little place like Dillingham we always pull together and do what we have to do. I don't think anybody could ever starve in our town."*

*-Patty Luckhurst*

*"We succeeded because we were all smart enough to know that we couldn't wait on this. If we didn't do it then it wouldn't be done because the equipment would be gone and wouldn't be back for a long time."*

*-Marilyn Rosene*

Two days later the Commissioner of DOT issued the following policy:

"It is the policy of this department that accommodations for bicyclists and pedestrians be considered and implemented for all of our highway projects. Exceptions to this policy will be made on a case-by-case basis."

## The Coalition is formed

There was no time to waste. Several citizen activists now adopted the name of the Pedestrian/Bike Path Coalition. With one meeting, the group divided up their work: identify people who could make the path happen; draft letters; develop a petition; gather signatures; mail the letters and petitions; and then follow up with phone calls.

They gathered 850 signatures quickly—even though it was fishing season—demonstrating the broad community support as well as the widespread dismay at the disregard for stated policy and understood agreements. They drafted letters placing emphasis on safety, health and quality of life.

The coalition sent the letters to the Governor, legislators and anyone else who might be in a position to help. The Coalition sent the formal petitions and attached formal statements of support from the Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation (BBAHC), the Dillingham City Council, the Dillingham Planning Commission, the Dillingham Comprehensive Plan, and the policy memoranda of the Governor and the Commissioner of the DOT.

Next, coalition members followed up their letters with phone calls to all the recipients. Finally, the action centered on John Horn, the Regional Director of DOT, in Anchorage. He was a bit overwhelmed by all the phone calls and requested that the Coalition select one spokesperson.

## The Negotiations

Janice Shilanski, a dedicated walker and one of the original members of the group that advocated for a paved path, assumed the role of spokesperson for the Coalition with John Horn. Her late husband, Rick, was known in the community as the "Road Warrior" for his relentless pursuit of safety issues in general and the Aleknagik Lake Road paving project in particular.

Janice Shilanski recounts the Coalition's negotiations with the Department of Transportation:

"When John Horn told me DOT didn't have the money, I said, 'John, This is ridiculous. At least tell us how much it would cost. If you are going to say 'no,' at least tell us how much it would have cost. Are we talking half a million? Two hundred fifty thousand? That's peanuts when you are talking about a job worth millions and millions. You're destroying our bike trail. This is ridiculous! You have all this heavy equipment come out and you spend all those millions of dollars and you can't spend the time to put in a bike path? We were told by the project manager that they had the time to do it and they would have no problem putting it in.'

“At that point I thought it was just bureaucratic baloney and I kept hassling him. ‘John, I am just appealing to you from our hearts. It is just ridiculous to bring this many millions of dollars of equipment out here.’ I repeated things.

“He eventually called back and said, ‘How about we put the paved path in for the first mile and half?’ I said, ‘It sounds like you’re bargaining with me. I can’t speak for the whole group. But I want the whole thing. I don’t want just a mile and a half.’ He said the first mile and half was going to cost around \$250,000. And then to go around this one culvert it was going to take about another \$150,000 because it was ‘an environmental thing,’ cutting across the creek. I said, ‘Well, I can’t speak for the group but I’ll take the first mile and half anyway.’ He didn’t feel that they could finish the whole project that summer if they had to get permissions and everything.

“It was done in a couple of weeks. It was quick! It boggled our minds. They had given us all these hassles. It was just bureaucracy. And I guess that is why I think the story needs to be told. If it truly cost \$250,000, as they said, that is nothing in a project like this for something so good.”

On July 7, 1998, only three weeks after the Coalition formed, Governor Knowles issued a press release announcing the approval of the bike path for Aleknagik Lake Road. He underscored that the path was part of his administration’s continuing effort to provide Alaskans with routes for alternative transportation and access to recreational facilities.

### **The Project Engineer’s View**

John Sorenson served as the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities’ Project Engineer for the Dillingham Project. He shares his view of the pedestrian/bike path’s story.

“When a paving plant and all the equipment come to town it is a big deal. It’s like a circus. Apart from the road project, people can do other jobs privately: parking lots could be done and driveways put in so kids can put up their basketball hoops. Kids are always shooting basketballs. That’s one reason we decided to go with asphalt instead of high float chip seal pavement. Another reason was that a local Dillingham kid did a science fair project that showed everyone that asphalt was a superior product. So everyone wanted asphalt. It makes all these other jobs possible ... including a bike path. When an asphalt plant comes to town it is huge.

“I knew the petition for the bike path was going on out there. But when things reach me there is no real way for citizen input. I have a set of plans, a contract and a budget. I have a little negotiating room, very little. I tell people, ‘I have all the power in the world—as long as my boss agrees.’

*“I came from a big family. Whenever the kids wanted something they would put me in front: Go ask Mom. So, I wasn’t afraid to pick up the phone and call. I think that is what people are afraid of. What’s the worst that can happen? They can say ‘no.’”*

*-Janice Shilanski*

*“The original plan we heard about in the DOT public meetings was for a complete road with a complete bike path. Each time they came to town the project got reduced. It didn’t matter what we said. They claimed—probably rightfully so—that the money got so reduced from the budget that they had to cut somewhere and it was always the bike path.”*

*-Mark Lisac*

“I went to a meeting at the city and Coalition members were there demanding things. I told them I couldn’t do a damn thing. The contractor was there and he got heated and said, ‘Why don’t you go call the governor.’ They must have done something like that because my boss called up and said, ‘They want to get a bike path out there. Is there any way you can do it?’

“Bike paths can be complicated. You can’t just build them over anything. There are drainage issues, big fills and cuts, buried utilities and rights of way. You have to figure out elevations. Elevations and grading can be tricky. It is not as simple as people think.

“I didn’t know how we could do it when my boss asked me. We didn’t have right of way. We didn’t have plans. You can’t just add things all the time. We have budgets. I could have said, ‘No, I don’t think we can.’ But I kind of stuck my neck out. For me, it was a growth thing—making the call that it could be done. I didn’t know how, but you trust people.

“There was a really good construction crew. The dozer hands and grader checkers and those types of people knew how to make it happen. You could tell them to go out and do it and they could build it. Most of them were not local guys. But you could see they liked Dillingham. But they were all professionals. Believe it or not, people have a lot of pride in their work. When they leave a job they want to see it right. Nobody likes to see bumps in the highway. So they made it work.

“Everybody wanted to make it work. We started building the bike path before we actually had the right of way. We went on time and materials and everybody was happy. It wasn’t a big fat hog.

“We stopped at a creek. It was the natural place, given the budget and complications. If we went further there were issues that I didn’t want to deal with. There was a pretty steep driveway. If you had the bike path alongside the road, the driveway would have to go down really steep. It was just another complicated problem. There were also more buried utilities. You can only deal with so much uncertainty. And, of course, we ran out of oil for the asphalt. We were right at the end of the construction season. It snowed a few days after we finished the path.

I am still working with the same construction crew. It has been four or five years and we have had a number of construction jobs together since then. But we still talk about that job. Dillingham was such a neat place. You don’t get that every day.”

### **The Path Becomes a “Park”**

The pedestrian/bike path was an immediate success. “The whole town came alive!” as Janice Shilanski put it. Another Dillingham resident, Christine DeCourtney, recalled that even before they completed the path, people “rode bikes and walked on the completed sections until turned back by amiable construction workers who promised, ‘We’ll be finished soon.’”

The path quickly became a place for more and more types of exercise and socializing. The people of Dillingham began calling it “the park” and using it throughout the day and through the four seasons.

The cost of path maintenance was a serious concern from the beginning. “The trail would never be used in the winter.” However, the first snows saw a man whose wife was recovering from cancer hook a plow to his ATV to clear a safe walking path to help rebuild her health. Other volunteers sprang to life to keep the trail a safe place to walk. The people of Dillingham have “owned” the park from the very beginning.

A year after the bike path was completed Christine DeCourtney reported in an article for a monthly magazine, *Ruralite*:

“Now, inline skaters, bikers, walkers, and joggers share the path. Wheelchair athletes no longer depend solely on a few dangerous miles of paved road. Elderly couples stroll along the path, arm-in-arm; people walk dogs; and dads breathe hard as they run along side children wobbling on new bikes. Parents carry babies in backpacks or push strollers sharing afternoon walks with friends.

“The weather doesn’t seem to matter—bug nets, colorful baby rain gear or fleece appear as needed.

“The bike path inspires community spirit and ingenuity. One resident, Tom Eveslage, built a rustic bench from logs and placed it along the path. Elders rest on it or giggly schoolgirls perch on it during a break from a game of hopscotch.

“Alaska West Supply, a local building supply company whose property adjoins the path, installed a portable toilet and posted a sign on the door: ‘Outhouse provided for your use, free of charge ... Enjoy the bike path.’”

Running groups meet at the path on certain days each week to work out together. The annual Tony’s Run, honoring a slain Dillingham policeman, now incorporates the path as a part of the race. Roller blading has been introduced and is popular. People who never walked before now park cars at one end and walk back and forth, then they get into their cars and go home. Organizations have health promotion programs. People clock their walking times. Additional paving of the Aleknagik Lake Road pedestrian bike path is planned for the next time the “paving plant circus comes to town.” In the meantime, it is not uncommon to see City Manager John Fulton or Norman Heyano of DOT operating heavy equipment on their weekends to sweep or plow the walkway or other volunteers pitching in as needed.

More benches have appeared over the past several years. In the summer of 2002 a new bench appeared anonymously on the pathway. It has the inscription “Shilanski Park” to honor Janice’s Shilanski’s late husband, the community’s health and safety “Road Warrior.”



*"I commute to town on my bicycle each day and often return after dark. I do this to maintain a health and fitness regimen. If it wasn't for the safety of the path, I'd be driving a car and losing out on a great aerobic session."*

*-Jon Sorensen*

### **Diabetes Prevention**

*"When we developed the Walk to be Fit program we used the bike path to stage a kick off promotion in June of 1999 and again in 2000. I am always encouraging diabetic patients here in Dillingham to go out and walk the bike path to gain control of their diabetes by walking and controlling the weight. In the last year we have been giving them pedometers and they go out and challenge themselves to walk more and more. We have been trying to do more awareness of the importance of exercise and I see more people using it all the time. It is so important to have a safe pleasant place to walk."*

*-Lois Schumacher  
Kanakanak Hospital*

## WHAT NUMBERS CAN TELL US

Regular exercise by youth and adults is an indicator of good health. It is considered a “leading health indicator” in state and national plans. This means that statistics about regular exercise habits are considered to be among the most important statistics describing the overall health of the population.

Alaska’s Division of Public Health regularly conducts the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey to find statewide and regional patterns of regular physical activity. Only 25% of Alaskan adults currently report engaging in regular, moderate physical activity. The State would like this number to climb to at least 40% by 2010. Communities with safe and enjoyable opportunities for biking, walking, and other forms of exercise should be able to achieve an even higher level than this modest objective.

To find out how kids are doing, there is a periodic survey in high schools and middle schools. The most recent information shows that Alaskan kids (72%) are more likely than American kids in general (65%) to get regular vigorous physical activity or sports. The target for Alaska is 85% by 2010. Communities can help increase physical activities by providing opportunities for residents to get regular exercise.

In Dillingham, residents used petitions and letter writing effectively to demonstrate demand. They were also effective in arguing in their letters and petitions that there were few, if any, safe opportunities for basic forms of exercising like walking, jogging, skating, biking, etc., especially for kids.

### **WOW!**

*Exercise decreases the risk of heart disease, diabetes and cancer, and also improves lung function, keeps bones strong and makes people happier!*

*“Unlike a small village where you need to visit with your neighbors just to get from one place to the next, in Dillingham people tend to bustle around isolated in little cars. The path appeals to that need we all have to smile and to nod our heads in the park to somebody else—those little everyday interactions that make life worth living whether we know it or not.”*  
-Cristy Tilden



Another low cost strategy for measuring demand for a health promotion project is to count the number of users. For a free public access facility like Dillingham’s “park,” this could be done by periodically counting the number of users on different days of the week or different times of day, by recording the different types of users, or a combination of both. High school students could get experience with “research” by designing a survey and analyzing the results. Their research could be about the use of an existing resource like the Dillingham bike path, or about community interest in a new facility or resource.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER

Traditional Alaskan lifestyles have always included vigorous physical activities like hunting, fishing and food gathering, walking and dancing. New lifestyles have brought the challenge of finding opportunities for regular physical activity. In larger urban areas, the opportunities for safe regular exercise are numerous. Health clubs, bike paths, swimming pools, ski areas, parks, bowling alleys, and organized sports for children and adults, to mention just a few, broaden the range of choices.

Dillingham residents used the 1995 policies of the Governor and State Department of Transportation and Public Facilities to have their pathway upgraded into the “park.” The 1998 federal Transportation Equity Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century also strongly supports bicycle and walking accommodations in road and highway construction projects. While neither the state nor federal policies require the addition of pathways to roadways, they do require that bicyclists and pedestrians be considered and accommodated.

Communities can get help in developing and promoting ideas from the Bicycle and Pedestrian Coordinator at the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities. The “Bike Ped” Coordinator keeps up with latest developments in bicycle and pedestrian design and planning and works with transportation planners and engineers to ensure that the needs of bicyclists, pedestrians and other types of users are safely addressed in State transportation

projects. The coordinator is also available to work with communities to give technical feedback and advice. While the coordinator does not get involved in specific projects, he or she can refer you to the person in charge of a project, and help work it through the bureaucracy.

The State’s Trails and Recreational Access for Alaska (TRAAK) program offers several funding opportunities, the largest of which is the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities’ State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). The STIP includes a separate category for TRAAK projects such as pathways, waysides and other transportation enhancements that are above and beyond the normal road construction project. Anyone can nominate a project, though projects supported by local communities tend to score higher.

Smaller recreational projects can be funded through the Department of Natural Resources’ Recreational Trails Grant program. They are available annually for educational and trail building projects, with applications due in September or October. Data on potential or current users, and evidence of community support, strengthen the application. Letters of support from individual citizens, public figures, agencies and organizations are good ways to show the importance and need for a trail or other health promotion project ([www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks/grants/trails.htm](http://www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks/grants/trails.htm)).

Does your community need a pedestrian/bike path or some other project or facility that would promote health, bring the community together, and enhance the quality of life? Dillingham’s “park” has been successful because the community really wanted it. Only the community itself can say what it really wants. That is what ownership is about.

## **The Coalition That Didn't Give Up**

*Mike Davis*

*Theresa Duncan*

*Sam Eveslage*

*John Fulton*

*Cindy Frye*

*Phil Frye*

*Chris Hladick*

*Wendy Hladick*

*Denise Lisac*

*Mark Lisac*

*Patty Luckhurst*

*Dee O'Connell*

*Dan O'Connell*

*Marilyn Rosene*

*Janice Shilanski*

*Jon Sorensen*

*Lois Sorensen*

*Cristy Tilden*

*Julie Woodworth*

In Dillingham it was easy to tell what people wanted because they had already created it. But safety was a problem. They needed to pave the old, bumpy, trail to make it safe and versatile. When they did, people came in droves.

Discover the resources and opportunities that are available to promote your project. If your project is a bike trail, you should ask yourself the following types of questions:

- Does the State have plans for paving projects in your community?
- If so, do the plans include a pedestrian/bike path or opportunities for construction of a pedestrian/bike path? If not, find out why not.
- Does your local government have plans for walkway accommodations? If not, find out why not.
- Keep in mind it is possible to use existing State of Alaska right-of-ways.

No matter what your project is, discover and create support for it around town. Don't leave out any groups: parents with infants, children, teenagers, adults, persons with disabilities, the elderly, couch potatoes and the hard core fitness enthusiasts. Find out what is important for each group and what needs a pedestrian/bike path would really meet. Circulate a petition.

- Gather as many signatures as possible, including children's. Kids do count.
- Emphasize the important issues: safety and health.
- Mail a letter to each official and include a copy of the signed petitions.
- Select a person in your group to follow up with a phone call within one week.
- Don't give up! If it is really important, make it happen.

Get your local government to pass a resolution clearly stating the importance of the project to the health, well-being and safety of the community and send a copy of the resolution to any and all officials who may be in a position to help—especially those with some personal ties to the community. Some good contacts to consider include:

- The Governor directly or through the Governor's office in Juneau or through the nearest regional office.
- The Commissioners of Transportation and Public Facilities and Health and Social Services ... or their nearest regional directors. The Governor's Office should be helpful in identifying the most appropriate contacts.
- Local Council or Assembly members
- The state senator for your district
- The state representative for your district

If a state, federal or local government agency is important to your project, you have a right to expect that the officials you talk with help you understand the issues involved. If you don't understand, do not be afraid to ask questions. If you are not getting the cooperation that you think is reasonable, then seek assistance from someone who might be able to help: the head of the office or agency, an elected representative, etc.

**Whatever you do ... DON'T GIVE UP!**



## TO FIND OUT MORE

Physical Activity and Preventing Disease  
[www.aspe.hhs.gov/health/reports/physicalactivity/](http://www.aspe.hhs.gov/health/reports/physicalactivity/)

Guide to Community Preventive Services  
[www.thecommunityguide.org/home\\_f.html](http://www.thecommunityguide.org/home_f.html)

Federal Highway Administration Guidance  
[www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bikeped/bp-guid.htm](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bikeped/bp-guid.htm)

Alaska Department of Natural Resources  
[www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks/misc/trails.htm](http://www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks/misc/trails.htm)

Bicycle and Pedestrian Coordinator  
Division of Statewide Planning  
Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities  
(907) 465-4070

## REFERENCE CHAPTERS IN HEALTHY ALASKANS 2010, VOLUME I

Chapter 1. Physical Activity and Fitness  
Chapter 7. Health Communication  
Chapter 8. Injury Prevention  
Chapter 20. Arthritis and Osteoporosis  
Chapter 21. Heart Disease and Stroke  
Chapter 23. Diabetes  
Chapter 24. Respiratory Disease  
Chapter 25. Disability and Secondary Conditions

## NOTES