

## *May 2013 Update for the Alaska Highway Heritage Project*

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### **Background**

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#### **Alaska Highway Community Society**

The Alaska Highway Community Society (AHCS), formerly the Northern Rockies Alaska Highway Tourism Association (NRAHTA), has been spearheading efforts to raise awareness about the importance of the Alaska Highway for over thirty years. In 2004, NRAHTA organized the 2004 Alaska Highway International Forum. The event concluded with 13 communities from BC, Yukon and Alaska signing the Alaska Highway Community Initiative Memorandum of Understanding signifying a commitment to work together on matters of mutual interest regarding future tourism and heritage planning, and development of the route. The Fort St. John office of the Northern British Columbia Tourism Association (NBCTA), a not-for-profit society, administers the affairs of the AHCS.

The vision of the AHCS and its partners is to ensure that the cultural landscape of the Alaska Highway is recognized as one of North America's most significant historical routes and to recognize the shared settler and First Nations history of the highway corridor.

#### **AHCS Activities and Projects**

The importance of heritage tourism in building a brand for the Alaska Highway, improving visitor experiences, and enhancing local understanding of the region's history is supported through findings in the Northern Rockies Alaska Highway Research Project and recommendations from stakeholder meetings and community tourism plans.

The AHCS, its predecessor, and related organizations have supported various projects concerning the commemoration and celebration of the Alaska Highway, including:

- The Rendezvous '92 Project corresponding with the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Alaska Highway (a large scale promotional and marketing strategy, the project resulted in various products including a conference and subsequent publications that focused, among other things, on the impact of the highway on local First Nations) (1988-1992);
- The Fort St. John Airport (the new terminal was erected in 2005 and contains exhibits on the Alaska Highway);
- The permanent exhibit at the Alaska Highway House (the exhibit explores three themes: the Highway was built for war; the Highway is the road to northern adventure; and the Highway changed the North forever) (2007);
- The nomination of the Kiskatinaw River Bridge as a National Historic Site of Canada (2007);
- The Charlie Lake Monument (honouring the 12 soldiers that lost their lives in the accident on May 14, 1942) (2008);
- Commemorative ceremonies held in Fort St. John and at Sikanni Chief River Bridge recognizing

- the contributions of African American soldiers in the construction of the Alaska Highway (2011);
- The Alaska Highway First Nation Story Collecting Project (co-funded by the North East Native Advancing Society (NENAS) to document First Nation stories and experiences associated with the Alaska Highway, the project provided First Nation community story collectors with training, mentoring and skills development in story collecting techniques) (2011-2012);
  - The Taylor Memory Project (to document the history of Taylor, BC through oral history) (2011-2012);
  - The nomination of the Alaska Highway as a National Historic Site of Canada has been identified as a strategic objective in the Community Tourism Foundations Tourism Plans for Fort Nelson, Fort St. John, Taylor, Dawson Creek & Pouce Coupe, Hudson's Hope and Chetwynd (2009-present); and
  - The Alaska Highway Heritage Project (ongoing work to nominate the Alaska Highway Corridor as a National Historic Site of Canada) (2011-2014).

## **The Alaska Highway Heritage Project: Nomination of the Corridor as a National Historic Site of Canada**

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In recent years, the AHCS has turned its attention to the benefits of nominating the cultural landscape of the Alaska Highway Corridor as a National Historic Site of Canada (NHSC). While the building of the Alaska Highway has been commemorated as an “event” of National Historic Significance, this project is focused on the commemoration of a physical place – the cultural landscape. This form of recognition is honorific only; on its own, it confers no legal obligations to protect historic resources or establish interpretation programs. For the nomination to succeed in the category of “historic place”, a plan for protecting key heritage places will be required. Due to the corridor’s scale and environment, a set of discrete, geographically dispersed resources representing all the major themes in the highway’s history would be proposed for conservation. The resources would be proposed and approved by the communities themselves. One example is likely to be the Kiskatinaw Bridge located north of Dawson Creek, BC, on an old section of the highway.

If commemoration is granted, it would provide a framework for partners to collaborate on seeking support for projects that would help tell the story of the Alaska Highway and its diversity (as both history and landscape). Commemoration would also help protect significant physical resources that owners and communities agree should be conserved for the benefit of local residents and visitors. At a practical level, one of the expected outcomes of commemoration is the implementation of a strategy to improve highway amenities for travelers. A fundamental principle of the project is that the operation, maintenance and development of the present-day transportation route must not be affected by the nomination.

The Alaska Highway Nomination is to be completed by March 2014 for submission to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC). The HSMBC requires up to two additional years to review each application; our application will be one of many the agency receives annually. The AHCS’s goal is to have the highway achieve national historic site status by 2017, the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Alaska Highway and the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Canada’s Confederation.

The decision to pursue the commemoration as a National Historic Site of Canada evolved from work undertaken by NRAHTA and is based on results from various strategic initiatives, as well as ongoing projects. They have included:

- Tourism BC’s Northern Rockies Alaska Highway Research Project;

- Information sharing through events such as the Alaska Highway International Forum and North East Regional Round Table;
- Community Tourism Workshops conducted in 2005-2006;
- Discussions with government agencies including Public Works Government Services Canada and presentations by Parks Canada and Heritage Branch of BC subject experts;
- Northeastern BC Community Tourism Foundations Tourism Plans completed 2009 to present;
- Community Heritage Values workshops in Fort Nelson, Dawson Creek and Fort St. John in March 2013; and
- Observations and discussions resulting from the Alaska Highway First Nation Story Collecting Project and the Taylor Memory Project.

## Funding and Professional Support

The Peace River Regional District has been the primary funder for the project in BC. Additionally, the Northern Rockies Regional Municipality, the Province of BC Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure and the City of Dawson Creek are providing in-kind and financial support.

Contentworks, an Ottawa-based heritage consultancy led by Julie Harris, has been engaged to assist with the research, development and preparation of the nomination with input from the communities and stakeholders.

To date, the project has:

- Completed a survey of the known information and information holders (community members, archives, museums, etc.) in BC and Yukon;
- Developed an Alaska Highway Heritage Survey Database which will ultimately feed into a Cultural Resource Inventory;
- Identified historic themes (e.g. relationship between the highway and air routes, role of First Nations, growth of the population centres) significant to both the story and development of community-based interpretation;
- Propose options for boundaries within the BC section – preliminary research has identified 185 discrete sites of potential interest for determining boundaries of the ‘designated place’;
- Met with stakeholders, including local governments, provincial and territorial heritage staff, First Nations in BC, and tourism operators;
- Set out a work plan;
- Released a Findings Report;
- Presented to the Heritage Canada National Summit in Montreal in October 2012;
- Set up a website and other communications products; and
- Co-delivered Community Heritage Values Workshops in Fort Nelson, Dawson Creek and Fort St. John during March 2013.

## Next Steps

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### Tier 1

The Alaska Highway Corridor crosses the BC-Yukon Boundary. Approval from all parties (landowners, local governments and First Nations) affected by the nomination is needed for it to be considered by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada and its administrative body (Parks Canada.) The current sponsor, the AHCS, represents BC organizations and local governments only. Yukon involvement is needed to complete the nomination, including continuing support from the Yukon Historic Sites, Cultural

Services Branch of the Yukon government. Other work is required to identify a person and group able to serve as the 'champion' for Yukon's involvement in parallel with BC members of the AHCS.

Yukon engagement, and continuing BC engagement, is critical to:

- Learn more about the themes and places of importance to them within the Alaska Highway Corridor;
- Contribute to the definition of the Corridor's boundaries and values as a cultural landscape; and
- Identify ways to make the nomination beneficial to a broad range of cultural and tourism concerns.

More work is also required on First Nations engagement in both BC and Yukon to set out an engagement strategy that is most likely to lead to resolutions in support of the commemoration. This work will also serve to:

- Seek feedback about the level of involvement that each First Nation prefers;
- Learn more about the themes and places of importance to them within the Alaska Highway Corridor;
- Contribute to the definition of the Corridor's boundaries and values as a cultural landscape;
- Determine whether there is strong support for the nomination; and
- Identify ways to make the nomination beneficial to a broad range of cultural and tourism concerns.

The two immediate needs are a financial sponsor for the engagement work and an engagement strategy.

## Tier 2

In addition to bringing Yukon more directly into the project and implementing an engagement strategy for First Nations, the AHCS will continue working on:

- Mapping of the scope of the Corridor's cultural landscape and character;
- Meeting with individuals and groups in BC and Yukon who can advise on the nomination in general and on specific resources of heritage value;
- Documenting meetings and input;
- Communicating with the general public and specific stakeholders;
- Investigating options to make the nomination's heritage and tourism goals more likely to succeed; and
- Preparing the nomination form.