

Whistle Stop Service in Chugach National Forest

Project Scope

The USDA Forest Service (USFS) and Alaska Railroad (ARRC) are partners in developing a whistle stop service to provide a variety of world-class recreation and transportation opportunities for users of the Chugach National Forest. The project will develop up to five sites between Portage and Moose Pass that will be accessible by rail and interconnected by trail (see *Figure 1*). Development at each site will vary, depending on the terrain and potential recreational opportunities.

All sites include accessible boarding and unboarding facilities, passenger shelter, toilets and interpretive signage (see *Figure 2*). Other possible features include picnic facilities, camping facilities, wildlife viewing facilities and expanded trails.

The project trail system will consist of about 35 miles of trail between proposed whistle stop locations. One new trail would interconnect Luebner Lake, Spencer, Bartlett Glacier and Grandview. Plans for Spencer, Bartlett Glacier and Grandview include spur trails leading to viewing platforms, natural features and camping facilities.

A successful whistle stop experience requires rail passenger equipment to be independent of other railroad operations. The original project scope calls for two self-propelled railcars.

Benefits

This project offers a number of benefits to visitors and residents of Alaska. The project:

- Provides an opportunity for people to connect with nature in a unique, safe, world class and memorable setting.
- Provides controlled access to the Chugach National Forest backcountry while protecting the

resources. Currently, access to the forest's backcountry in this area is extremely limited.

- Provides a variety of activities for people with varying degrees of skill.
- Supports the Alaska Railroad's Anchorage-Seward operations with increased ridership.
- Development of the rail route offers new opportunities to disperse recreational activities from the congested highway, thereby reducing heavy summer traffic.

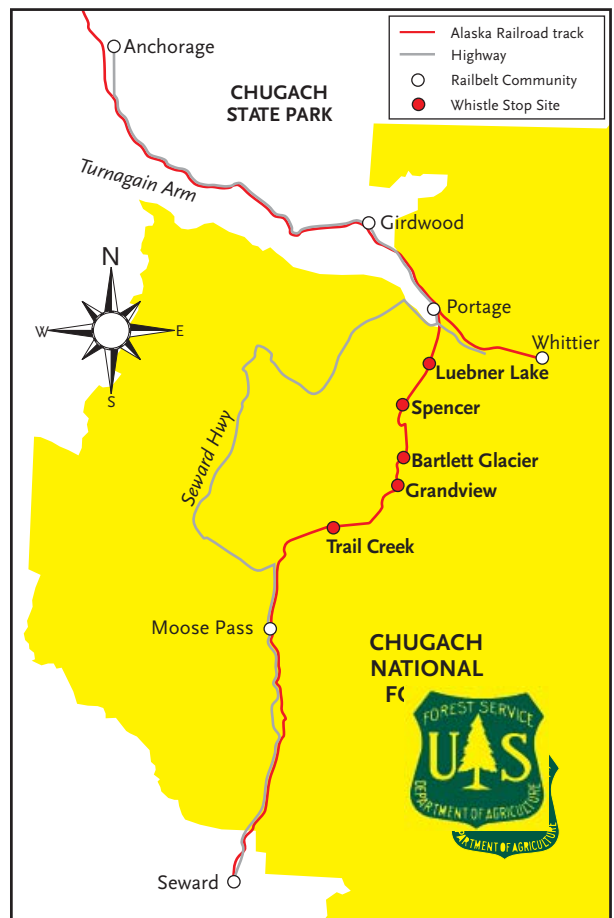


Figure 1. Proposed Whistle Stop Locations

Project Status

- In 2003, the Alaska Railroad and Forest Service entered into a partnership with a Memorandum of Understanding.
- A business plan was completed in 2005. ARRC and USFS entered into an agreement recognizing workforce contributions from both entities, and further developed an Annual Operating Plan.
- As lead agency, USFS began environmental work required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in spring 2005. Field work identified the location of use areas, future trails, campsites, and cabins throughout the project area. The NEPA process concluded in August 2006.
- Construction will occur in phases, dictated by demand and available funding.
 - Phase I: Spencer.
 - Phase II: Grandview
 - Phase III: Luebner Lake & Bartlett Glacier
 - Phase IV: Trail Creek
- **Spencer:** Site construction began in fall 2006 and was complete in July 2007 (see page 4).
 - » **Second Placer River Bridge:** The second of two pedestrian bridges crossing the Placer River is on hold, pending funding.



The DMU operates on ARRC's track in early May 2009.

- **Railcar:** A bi-level self-propelled commuter railcar was ordered to include special features (i.e., a control cab at either end and a wheelchair lift on either side) to facilitate whistle stop service. Colorado Railcar began design and manufacture of the diesel multiple unit (DMU) in late 2007. The DMU was delivered to Alaska in April 2009, and was put into service in May 2009.
- **Grandview:** Site and facility construction was completed in 2013 and opened to the public in 2014.
- **Luebner Lake:** Luebner Lake Whistle Stop at ARRC MP 55.7 is scheduled to be the next site constructed after

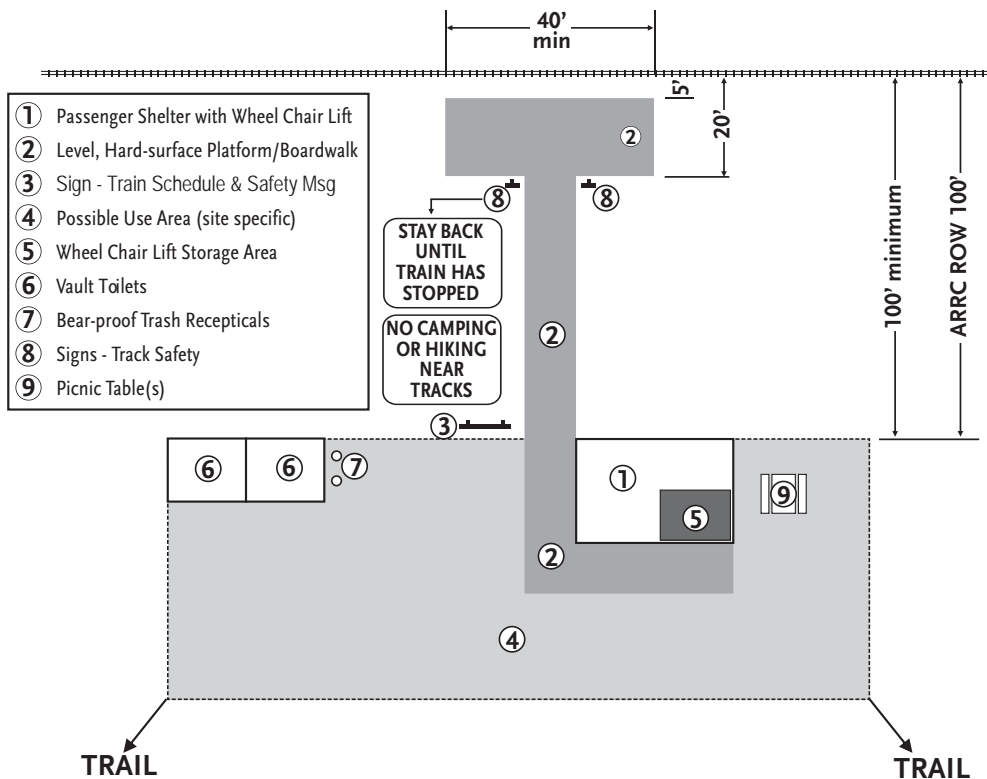


Figure 2.
Typical Whistle Stop Layout Concept for facilities at Bartlett, Luebner Lake and Trail Creek sites.

Grandview. Facilities will be smaller than Spencer and Grandview with one pavillion and one single-vault toilet.

- **Trail System:** The USFS is constructing whistle stop trail spurs and interconnecting trail:

In 2009, a new 1.3-mile trail was constructed from Spencer Whistle Stop site to Spencer Glacier, allowing visitors an opportunity to touch glacier ice.

Construction of the Spencer Bench Trail began in 2009, leading from Spencer Glacier north, and up 3 miles to Spencer Bench Cabin. This trail is planned to eventually connect with the future Leubner Lake Whistle Stop site.

Construction continues on a new trail leading from Spencer Glacier south to link with the Grandview Whistle Stop site and north to Luebner Lake. In order to connect Spencer and Grandview sites, substantial pedestrian bridges must be constructed. One is needed at the confluence of the Placer River and Spencer Glacier outflow, and another is needed at Bartlett Glacier. These two pedestrian trail bridges are not currently funded.

- **Public Use Cabin:** The USFS is constructing a six-person public-use cabin atop Spencer Bench. The cabin was constructed in 2012 in Southeast Alaska using locally-grown yellow cedar. It was dismantled into construction bundles and shipped to the Glacier Ranger District in Girdwood for storage. 2013 plans call for the railroad to haul the bundles to Spencer, where they will be airlifted by helicopter to the bench site. Construction on the cabin was completed in 2014, and expected to open for public use during summer 2015.



Luebner Lake Whistle Stop site

Cost and Funding

- Chugach National Forest received the initial \$1.8 million, spent as follows:
 - » \$600,000 for USFS plans, survey and design of whistle stop infrastructure.
 - » \$900,000 for ARRC planning, design and construction of Spencer Whistle Stop infrastructure, and initiating Grandview design.
- \$4.7 million USFS grant, administered by the Federal Transit Administration in 2007, to procure a bi-level self-propelled DMU. An additional \$648,000 was budgeted in 2009, funded by FTA and ARRC, for a total of \$5.35 million.
- Placer River Bridges, Phase One is funded by a \$1.6 million American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) grant obtained in 2009-2010 by the Forest Service.
- Grandview Whistle Stop was funded by a \$1.24 million ARRA grant obtained by the USFS. The ARRC funded \$60,442 to construct the Grandview platform.
- Additional funding from the Forest Service, Federal Highway funds, Alaska Railroad and other partners will be necessary to complete the project. Initial conceptual planning estimates indicate that construction of infrastructure and recreational facilities at all the sites would cost more than \$14 million.



View of Spencer Glacier from Spencer Bench Trail.

Spencer Whistle Stop

Design for whistle stop facilities was approved by the Forest Service and State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) in December 2006 (see Figure 3). Pavilions and toilet facilities are representative of a historic railroad camp. Photos of the Dead Horse Creek (Curry) Railroad Construction Camp served as models for the board-and-batten theme for facility construction. All wood is white cedar, with boards 6 to 10 inches and randomly interspersed to provide an irregular appearance. Battens (narrow strips of lumber used to seal or reinforce a joint) are a uniform 1-by-2-inches. The site pavilions have the same 16-by-20-foot footprint, but differ depending on sides left open, with board-and-batten siding or multi-pane window(s).

Facility construction began in May 2007 and was completed in July. Completion of the first site at Spencer made it possible to begin the whistle stop service in August 2007. U.S. Senators Ted Stevens (Alaska) and Daniel Inouye (Hawaii) attended a formal grand opening on August 16, 2007. This project milestone coincided with the Chugach National Forest's centennial celebration.

In 2008, the USFS constructed a campground with a water well featuring a rotary hand pump.

The first of two pedestrian bridges needed to cross the Placer River at Spencer was designed in 2010. Measuring 6-by-280 feet, the first bridge is located about 400 feet upriver from the railroad bridge. Construction began July 2011, continued through 2012 and was completed summer 2014.



Toilets and trash receptacles.



Facilities are not far from the track.



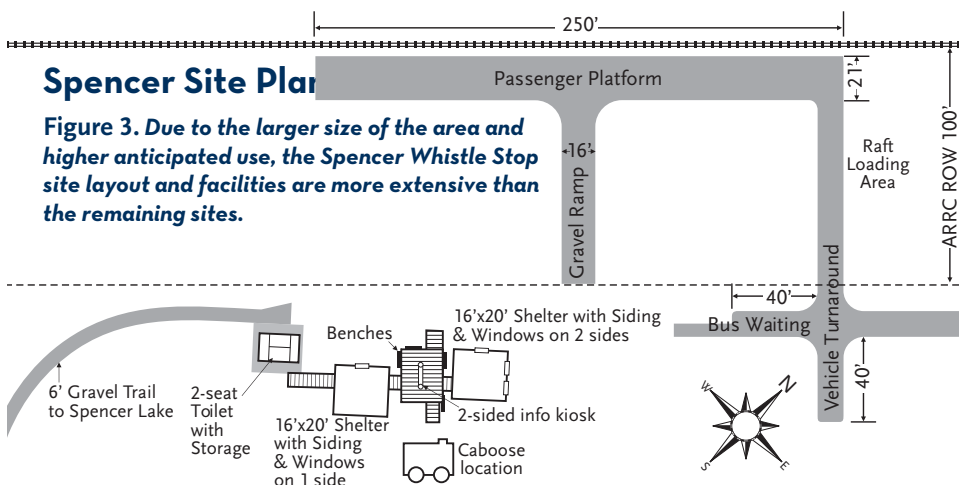
Passenger platform beside the track.



A two-sided interpretive kiosk in between shelters offers insight about the area.



The first of two pedestrian bridges is constructed over Placer River.



Spencer Site Plan

Figure 3. Due to the larger size of the area and higher anticipated use, the Spencer Whistle Stop site layout and facilities are more extensive than the remaining sites.



At the grand opening, a 100-year forest anniversary banner marks the trailhead.

Grandview Whistle Stop

In 2010, the location of the Grandview whistle stop was moved from a proposed site at ARRC milepost 48 to milepost 46.3. The site is located on Forest Service Land. Facilities will be similar to those at the Spencer whistle stop (see Page 4 and Figure 4 below).

Design and engineering work began in 2010. Site and facility construction got underway July - October 2011 and resumed in spring 2012. Construction of the facilities and a short on-site trail was completed in 2012.

Alaska Railroad maintenance-of-way (MOW) crews will construct a rail passenger platform during summer 2013, paving the way for site visitation. Platform construction was delayed by snow conditions from a late spring, as well as demands on MOW due to high-water situations along the railroad route. Once the platform is completed, passengers can disembark at the site to participate in wildlife and scenic viewing opportunities and a short hike along the trail. A

pedestrian bridge across the Placer River is part of the site plan. A 30-foot bridge was constructed in 2012 to provide pedestrian access over the river.



A Glacier Discovery Train stops at Grandview during the 2014 summer season.



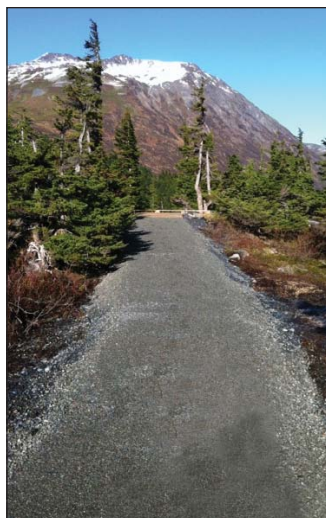
Shelters and sign kiosks at Grandview are similar to Spencer.



Facility construction complete by winter.



The small bridge over the Placer River.



The trail at Grandview.

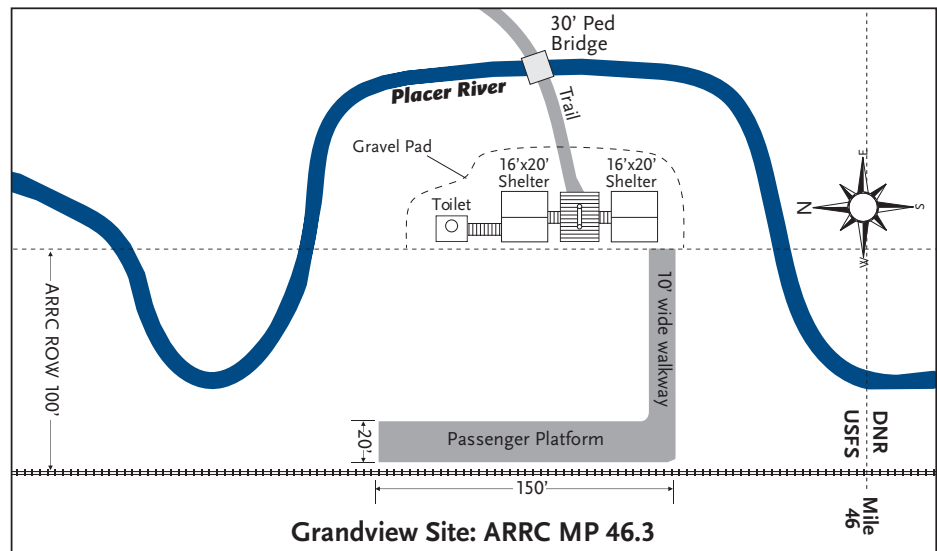


Figure 4. (right) Grandview Whistle Stop site plan at Mile 46.3