

## Chapter 1 PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

### 1.1 Introduction

The Western Federal Lands Highway Division (WFLHD) of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) with the City of Whittier (City), in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service (Forest Service), proposes to construct an approximately 2.5-mile gravel road extension of Shotgun Cove Road. The road would run parallel to the shoreline beginning at the current Shotgun Cove Road terminus (mile 2.0) and continue on to Forest Service land at Trinity Point. The proposed project begins two miles northeast of Whittier, Alaska, roughly paralleling and intermittently intersecting the existing Emerald Cove Trail (Sections 3, 8, 9, and 17, Township 8N, Range 5E, Seward Meridian; U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Quad Map Seward D-5; Figure 1-1). FHWA is the lead agency and the Forest Service is a cooperating agency.

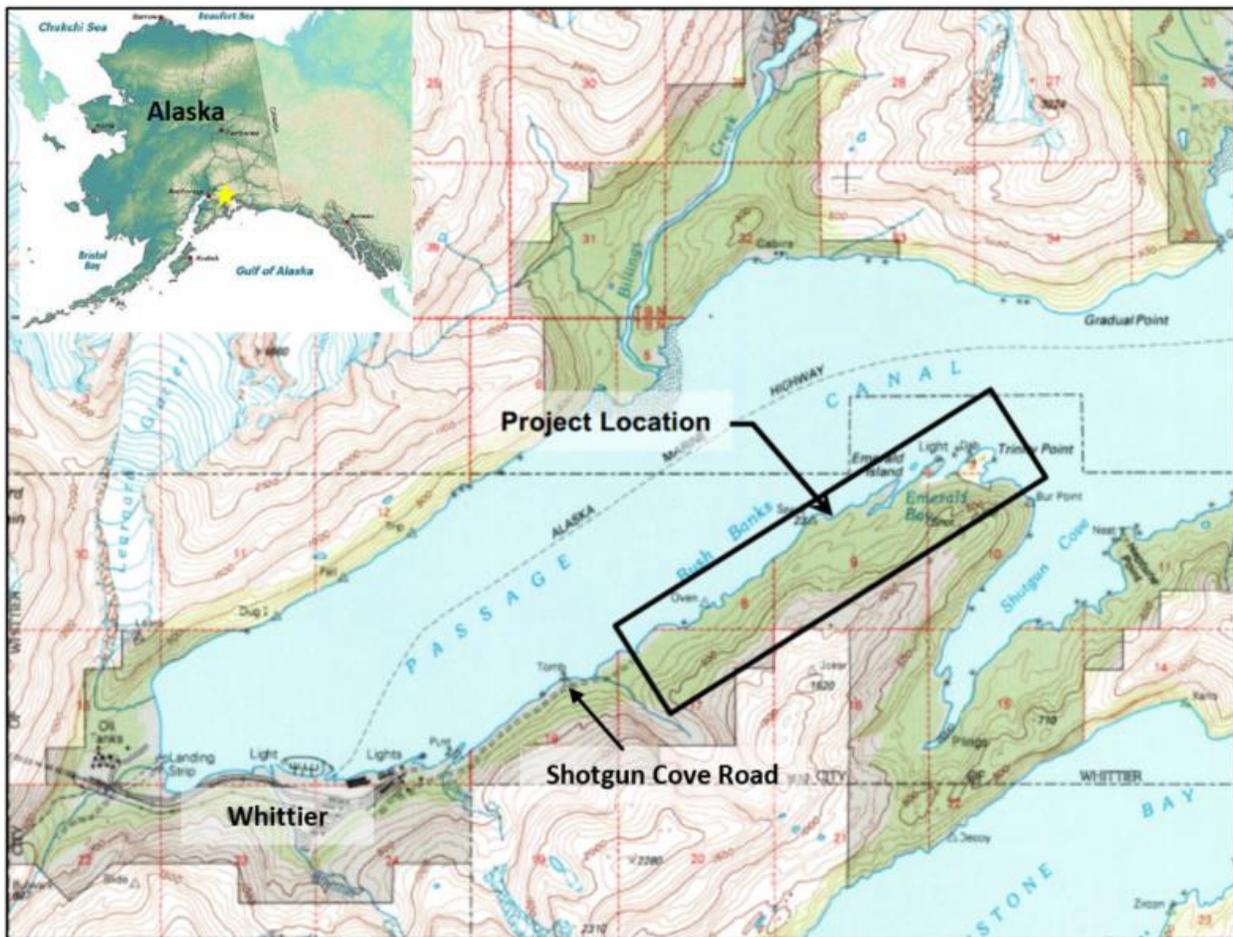


Figure 1-1. Proposed Shotgun Cove Road Extension Project Location and Vicinity

## 1.2 Background

Whittier, the “Gateway to Western Prince William Sound,” is a regional maritime center for commercial, recreational and subsistence fishing, shipping and small boat access, cruise lines, the Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS) and the Alaska Railroad Corporation (ARRC). Located within the Valdez-Cordova Census Area, Whittier supports a full-time resident population of 280 people on a small area of land at the head of Passage Canal (Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development 2020).

Whittier was originally used by the U.S. Army during World War I as a backup deep water port in the event Seward, located 90 miles south, was rendered inaccessible. By 1943, a railroad tunnel was constructed through Maynard Mountain, creating an overland connection to move supplies from Whittier to other areas in Alaska. The tunnel was modified in 2000 to allow for vehicle travel. Although the community is small, Whittier attracts large crowds for its use as a deep-water port and proximity to natural resources and excellent vistas. More than 15% of Alaska’s total marine freight is moved through the Ports of Whittier and Valdez (Prince William Sound Economic Development District 2019). Whittier’s 1.8 miles of shoreline serves the needs of 518,000 automobile passengers; 150,000 cruise ship passengers; 75,000 ARRC passengers; 20,000 AMHS ferry passengers; and 12,000 small boat launches annually (City of Whittier 2016). While in Whittier, visitors take scenic tours by ship, on foot, and by small watercraft. Anglers and hunters use the area for commercial, sport, and subsistence fishing and bear and deer subsistence and sport hunting. Recreation opportunities are available year-round and include hiking, boating, snowshoeing, skiing, and snow machining.

Although the city has a thriving tourism industry, a lack of infrastructure, including roads and recreation facilities, hinders Whittier’s growth and economic development and provides limited access to federal and other public land. Approximately 90% of the land in and around Whittier is owned by the ARRC, the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF), the State of Alaska, or the Forest Service. However, due to limited infrastructure, much of the public lands around Whittier are very difficult to access. The State of Alaska transferred land along Passage Canal to the City in 1994 to help combat these limitations with the stipulation that the City would create access to these lands and prepare adjacent land for public sale (Alaska Department of Natural Resources [ADNR] 1994). In the fall of 2018, the City completed construction on a 2.0-mile segment of Shotgun Cove Road extending toward this land. This first segment of road created access points to Passage Canal at Lu Young Park and to uplands at Cove Creek and Second Salmon Run.

With the goals of increasing access to federal and state lands; expanding opportunities for economic, residential, and commercial development; and alleviating pressure on the regional transportation systems, the City applied for and obtained funding from the FHWA’s Federal Land Access Program (FLAP) for permitting, design, and construction of the Shotgun Cove Road Extension (mile 2.0 to 4.5).

## 1.3 Purpose

The purpose of the proposal is to improve access to federal and state lands, alleviate pressure on Whittier's regional transportation system, and realize potential economic growth. Specifically, the project is focused on providing access to federal and state coastal lands and uplands along Passage Canal, on Trinity Point, and within Prince William Sound; and providing access to City land for recreation and development.

## 1.4 Need

Currently, there are limited opportunities to access federal public land outside of Whittier. The road extension would allow residents and the influx of more than 700,000 annual visitors the option of driving to Trinity Point where they could then launch non-motorized watercraft to public lands throughout Prince William Sound. Future planned development along the road (see Chapter 3; Figure 3-1) would provide additional opportunities for boat access and recreational development.

The project is needed because the community of Whittier struggles with overcrowding in the summer. Whittier's full-time residents (approximately 280) are responsible for keeping the town's infrastructure intact and operational year-round while the crowds come and go. Providing a land-based access along more of the Passage Canal shoreline would reduce small boat traffic at the existing Whittier Harbor. Whittier Harbor is at capacity and the single boat launch experiences congestion, overcrowding, and long wait times during peak operations. That means a diverse range of users – from kayaks to cruise ships and AMHS ferries – are coming and going from one central location. Future development of water access along the proposed route would help ease the harbor bottleneck. Small, non-motorized boats would be able to launch and retrieve at sites along the road, reducing risks associated with the interaction between these small vessels and the much larger freight, ferry, and cruise vessels. Launching at Trinity Point would also shorten the distance to popular destinations in Prince William Sound.

The project is also needed to help Whittier realize potential economic growth. Bounded on all sides by mountains and marine waters, the City's infrastructure has not expanded measurably since the mid-1900s. Physical and geographical limitations restrict the community's ability to capitalize on tangible recreation, subsistence, commercial, and industrial opportunities. This project would help translate tourist congestion into measurable economic benefits for the people and businesses of Whittier, interstate commerce, and state tourism. Providing road access to public lands would help accommodate the crush of summer visitors and also encourage an increase in year-round recreation which in turn would allow an increase in tourism or recreation-related businesses. The City's 2012 Comprehensive Plan Update highlights the importance of expanding road facilities for community growth, and the 2020 Comprehensive Plan reinforces these ideals (City of Whittier 2012; 2020). The project aligns with several plan goals within different identified focus areas: to improve overall visitor experience (Focus Area 1: Goal 2); to create recreational opportunities within Whittier that will increase tourism and attract both visitors and residents (Focus Area 1: Goal 3); and to increase opportunity for business retention and new business development within Whittier (Focus Area 5: Goal 1). Additionally, the Shotgun Cove Road Extension Project is specifically mentioned in the 2020 plan as an ongoing priority project for the City.