

Iditarod Trail Committee, Inc.
Special Meeting of the Board of Directors
Via Teleconference
February 7, 2002

The meeting was called to order by President Rick Koch at 8:00 a.m.

Members present: Richard Burmeister, John Handeland, Rick Koch, Lee Larsen, Sam Maxwell, Mike Owens, Dan Seavey, Rick Swenson and Dick Westlund

Members absent: None

Others present: Stan Hooley, Executive Director; Joanne Potts, Recording Secretary/Race Director; Jack Niggemyer, Race Manager and Mark Nordman, Race Marshal

The president explained that the purpose of the meeting is for the board to give direction to the staff regarding contingency plans for the race should we be unable to re-start the race on this side of the Alaska Range. He explained that yesterday's reports (from Bill Kramer) were that the trail is impassable. He said that with food drops being this week, we should tell the staff to develop a contingency plan and be prepared to access the plan at a certain date. He suggested meeting again between the 16th and 20th of February to make the final decision.

He explained that we've been talking about the possibility of the Fairbanks or Nenana area for the re-start if we are unable to run a traditional Iditarod. He said the Iditarod staff is already talking to appropriate people to flesh out a plan and they need direction from the board.

Koch explained that today we're looking for a consensus of the board to give the staff direction to pursue a contingency plan for having a re-start in Nenana or Fairbanks. He noted that it is important to keep Anchorage the focal point of the start.

Westlund asked about going to the closest point of entry from Anchorage, which would be Nenana. He asked why we would consider extending it all the way to Fairbanks.

Niggemyer commented that from Nenana to Ruby to Ophir would add about 50 to 75 miles. To go from Ruby to Nome would cut off about 250 miles. A start in Fairbanks would add another 50 miles.

Swenson commented that we'd never get this chance again to start in Fairbanks. He said there has always been some animosity because of Fairbanks being the Quest home and Wasilla being the Iditarod home but said that the Iditarod doesn't belong to Wasilla or Anchorage. It's a dog sled race that belongs to Alaska. He suggested that if Fairbanks will assist us, it would do a lot to help this race.

Swenson suggested that we'd be done with Idita-Riders by noon and thought we could do a 3:00 p.m. re-start on Sunday afternoon. He said that would be better than the middle of the day.

Burmeister asked about wear and tear on the dogs.

Swenson commented that if we could get the North Start Borough to move quickly, there would be lots of options of places to start in Fairbanks.

Koch commented that a decision regarding re-start location doesn't need to be made today. He said it is important that the board give the staff direction to determine which location is the most viable.

Nordman commented that if we do something at 3:00 in the afternoon, we'd have a crowd. On Monday, we won't have a crowd.

Westlund commented that he felt we needed to explore both options. He suggested that we would still need someone responsible for putting the trail in the traditional manner. He asked if there is any safe way to get the dogs across the Alaska Range.

Niggemyer commented that the Yentna and Skwentna Rivers are opening up. He said the weather service had issued a warning of unsafe river travel in South Central Alaska. The forecast for the next 4 or 5 days is the same. He said there had been heavy wet snow in Finger Lake. A plan went through the pass late Wednesday but couldn't land at Rohn. He said there is no ice at Hells Gate, no snow to Nikolai. He said the river is open at Nikolai and as of 6 p.m. last night it was pouring rain in McGrath. He also said Unalakleet doesn't have significant snow either. A week ago we had a foot of snow in McGrath. That's now gone. He said it isn't going to get cold enough for long enough to freed the south fork of the Kuskokwim.

Handeland asked about a drop-dead date to go with the contingency plan.

Koch said he didn't think that could be determined today.

Hooley explained that this had been thought through a lot last week.

Niggemyer explained that this week is food drop. We can't delay that. There are too many things that happen around it. He said he could hold the supplies for from here to Takotna for 4 or 5 days. But we can't move the supplies out at the last minute.

Niggemyer said that he has had people out working on the trail until this weather started. He said we now have three snow machines stuck at Finger Lake that we may not get out until spring.

He said we can deal with the straw and heat with out too much trouble. He has been figuring out about food shipments and determined that Skwentna food will go to Manley. Rainy and Rohn drops will go to Tanana, Nikolai drops will go to Ruby and McGrath and Takotna drops will go to Cripple.

He said he doesn't know what the trails are like in the middle because we haven't been able to get out there with a plane. He explained that we'll have to create a checkpoint at Cripple is a place where it is safe to fly in. He said he has talked to the pilots and trailbreakers and they all feel we can make this work.

He said that personally, he is an advocate of Nenana rather than Fairbanks. He said coordinating with municipalities is difficult and he wouldn't want to have to do that twice in two days.

Koch said we would like to know before food drop but we can live with making the final decision on Monday the 17th.

Handeland pointed out that for people coming to Alaska for the start, that's too late. They need to have their tickets two weeks ahead of time.

Niggemyer commented that this will have a huge impact on a lot of people.

Nordman noted that we not only need snow but we need cold. He said in his own head, we wonders why we are delaying making a decision because he doesn't see both those happening.

Swenson said today is the day to make the decision to direct the staff to re-start the race in either Fairbanks or Nenana.

Dan Seavey asked about the trail geography.

Rick said you can go to Nenana down the river which is obviously the easiest and it's the shortest. Or there is the overland trail that would take you into old telegraph railroad trail. At Nenana there are three choices. You can take the

Irondog trail right down the river, 103 miles down the river but normal sane people don't go down the river. On the north bank it goes through Old Minto and Tolovana Roadhouse to Manley. And there is one on the south which was surveyed when they surveyed the railroad back in the 50's, called the commissioner's trail and that takes you to Kantishna River and you would go across the river and get on Charlie Boulding's trail that he uses to go back and forth to Manley. Either of those two overland routes is about 75 miles.

Swenson commented that Nenana to Nome is too short. He said we have a responsibility to our competitors and sponsors to have a minimum of 1,000 miles. He said we can start in Nenana and by going through Ophir we can get 75 to 100 miles more than the traditional Iditarod.

Niggemyer said we don't know what the trail is like around Shageluk or Cripple. He said it's crappy out there. But the potential for it coming back to something that resembles normal is better than on this side.

Swenson said that from talking to Charlie Boulding, one could safely hook up in Nenana and go to Ruby with no trail work.

Swenson suggested that going on the river is not a good option from Nenana to Manley. It would be better to go overland from Manley to Tanana.

Westlund suggested that unless Iditarod has resources to work on going in two directions, waiting until next Wednesday will slow us down.

Maxwell commented that we haven't seen the river. We're taking the word of people.

Niggemyer said we're talking to people we know and trust about the situation out there. He said we can't be everywhere at once but he knows who has good eyes and ears out there.

Maxwell commented that if we wait until next Wednesday, we would have a better long range forecast.

Handeland /Owens moved to move the re-start north of the Alaska Range to the Fairbanks area and direct the staff to look into opportunities in Nenana and Fairbanks.

Koch noted that he didn't expect to actually make a change at this meeting today. He asked Stan Hooley about his position. Hooley explained that personally he would like to hold out the option of preparing a contingency plan but not

saying in a definitive way that we're abandoning a south of the Alaska Range re-start. He said he would like to wait as long as we can.

Seavey asked about amending the motion to add in a date certain.

Handeland said he'd withdraw his motion if someone wanted to make a different one. He said if we don't want to make a decision, we can have the staff look at alternatives and report back on the 13th so we can have a decision on the 14th.

Nordman noted that we will have to leave it wide open to change food drops until a certain time after we tell the mushers.

Niggemyer commented that if we don't want to screw with food drop, it needs to be before Wednesday morning. He said we have only been thinking about this for 24 hours and we're not going to be able to get hold of anyone until Monday.

Nordman said we're saying that we'll absorb the extra cost to send extra food out. We're going to take another bag or two from competitors.

Niggemyer said that is one of those details we haven't figured out yet.

Swenson said it is more complicated than that. He said immediately today we have to contact every one of the mushers and tell them there is better than a 50% chance that this is going to happen to minimize the amount of shuffling of food drops.

Swenson noted that some of these checkpoints normally just get minimums and if we're going an alternate route, those places would need more supplies. We need to at least let the mushers know that this is what they should prepare for. Swenson explained that the board has a responsibility to the mushers to have a quality event and they are going to be really unhappy if we just flounder around.

Westlund commented that the sponsors do make an event out of this but mostly it's focused around the Anchorage area and on the rivers where we have reasonable access. It think its' reasonable from a sponsorship view that the sooner we know the better off we're going to be. But at the same time we want to make sure every effort has put contingency plans in place.

Handeland pointed out that we are looking at more cost and we would be wasting dollars by pursuing a traditional effort. He said 20 days isn't much time for anyone to change plans. He said he is still of the opinion that we need to make a decision.

Koch noted that the long range forecast isn't good.

Koch noted that on this motion, Swenson, because of his relationship in the race, has a conflict of interest and should not vote.

Handeland/Owens motion failed, 3 in favor and 4 against.

Lee Larsen suggested that in fairness, we shouldn't make a decision about moving until we've given staff directive to make arrangements. He said he had a question about sponsors, volunteers, etc. and asked how long the drive is to Fairbanks. Koch said it's about eight hours from Anchorage this time of year.

Swenson commented that there are minimal services between Wasilla and Fairbanks and he said the infrastructure is so limited in Nenana that it will barely be able to accommodate the mushers. There are facilities in Manley and Tolovana that we can rent. He said he understands why the board wants to wait but he thinks they are just fooling themselves and we're going to look like we're indecisive.

Owens said we'll never overcome the bad press if we go on what we know is a bad trail and we have major problems.

Burmeister commented that there is a strong possibility now if we go through the Alaska Range of losing a full team.

Westlund pointed out that the board isn't considering going through the Alaska Range right now. We're not talking about making bad decisions and putting either dogs or people in harms way.

Maxwell commented that that is why we're having this discussion at this early date. He said all he is saying is that Hooley has said he'd like to put it off a little but that doesn't mean that we can't go full throttle on making a plan and working the logistics just like we're going there. There's nothing that says that we can't put our plan together whether we make a decision today.

Westlund said he voted no on the fact that we're going to make the decision today.

Handeland/Owens moved to direct the staff to look at alternatives for the re-start and report back to the board on Tuesday afternoon.

Swenson commented that he can't keep being available for meetings. He said he doesn't see what is going to change between now and Tuesday. He said he had other responsibilities.

Seavey pointed out that he has a responsibility to the board.

Maxwell said he wants a little time to talk to people in Nenana and Fairbanks and to our sponsors and let them know what we have going on before we announce that we're moving there.

Nordman asked are we going ahead and announce the mileage and are we going to try to get people to fix their food drops or are we just going to let them send food drops in and let them add to it.

Hooley said we can advise them of the different scenarios and make sure they know there is a very strong possibility of a re-start north of the Alaska Range.

Nordman said that before we leave here we have to have mileage from Swenson and this will go out to every competitor. They can show up in Nenana with whatever they need to get to Manley.

Koch noted that we will have to be sure to communicate with everyone.

Swenson noted that as soon as we tell the mushers, Hooley will be hearing from the Anchorage Daily News.

Hooley noted that we will have to up front and honest with the media. Up until a week ago we thought there was still a good chance to move the re-start north to Willow. Now we think unless a miracle happens regarding weather, that's marginal.

Koch suggested putting out a press release saying we're looking at a contingency plan.

Hooley noted that he'd like to have the opportunity to contact city officials before we put out a press release.

Koch said he would assume that when we have the meeting Tuesday that would be the drop dead date.

Larsen asked if the motion could be amended so that if staff could have their discussions and make it work, there wouldn't have to be another board meeting.

Handeland noted that we would also have to contact those places where we are not going.

Koch said he would not vote for the motion with the amendment Larsen suggested because he doesn't want this to be a staff decision. He said he feels that must be a board decision.

Nordman noted that rule #54 clearly states that the race marshal may change the start or re-start based on conditions. Koch said he doesn't see that applying in this case.

Handeland asked about Nordman's position on this. Nordman said we can't start on this side of the Alaska Range.

Owens noted that as the second of the motion, he doesn't agree with the amendment.

Koch suggested that the board meet again at 3:00 on Tuesday afternoon.

Swenson commented that he didn't know why staff didn't begin to make calls to officials in Nenana and Fairbanks on Friday afternoon.

Koch noted that he had tried but couldn't reach either the Fairbanks mayor or the mayor of the North Star Borough on Friday afternoon.

Hooley noted that he is fearful of a Fairbanks re-start and said he would be easier in Nenana.

Swenson commented that he is offended because he can't vote. Burmeister noted that he is part owner of Flat Dog Kennels and therefore could have a conflict of interest. Seavey commented that he also has a conflict of interest.

Handeland/Owens motion passed unanimously.

The meeting was set for 2:00 p.m. on Tuesday.

Hooley suggested that we're just buying ourselves one business day as opposed to what he thought would be toward the end of the week and if we need to report back on Tuesday, he suggested that we make the decision today.

Koch said the most important thing coming out of those few days will be discussions with those officials.

Handeland asked if there is any chance we are going to decide not to go to the Fairbanks area. Burmeister asked if there is any chance we can go through the Alaska Range. Hooley said we don't know. The unexpected can't happen.

Hooley said that if this board is going to reconvene on Tuesday and make a decision, it's highly likely that one of those will be found doable by then. There's still a need for a meeting on Tuesday.

Seavey said it appears to him that this is within the staff's responsibility to make that decision and it appears to him that staff doesn't want to take the heat for making that decision and he said he assumes that is what the staff is supposed to do.

Seavey asked why the board would have to meet again. Koch explained that he doesn't want the staff to have the responsibility of the ultimate decision. He said he doesn't want the staff to be second guessed by people on the board or competitors or other folks. He wants the board to have the responsibility for making that decision.

Nordman asked if it couldn't be said that the board is going to go ahead and gather all information for a meeting on Tuesday but the likelihood is that we are not going to be starting on a traditional Iditarod. Because I'd like to see people move forward.

Koch noted that he has heard the staff get vilified for decisions they've made and he said he doesn't want to see that happen in something as important as this.

Swenson said our discussion today has been about starting in Nenana. He asked if that is what we want to do. He said we know Nenana will go for it.

Hooley pointed out that the race start focus needs to be in Anchorage and doing what we can to at least get to Campbell Airstrip. Where the re-start is less of an issue that finding a spot that is logistically easiest to manage and provides the best trail for the race.

Seavey/ moved to negate the previous motion and direct that the re-start will be in Nenana.

Handeland noted that he had just spoken to the Mayor of Fairbanks and he is more than interested in talking to Koch and Hooley. He said it doesn't have to wait until Monday.

Seavey's motion died for lack of a second.

Hooley said staff will explore both options and provided we get the kind of assistance we need at the eleventh hour in a metropolitan area, either one will be a viable alternative.

Seavey commented that Nenana is more musher friendly than Fairbanks. He said don't expect the mushers to drive all night to get there. Nordman will put some energy into coming up with time frames.

Niggemyer asked at what point does he call Skwentna, for example, and say we're not coming?

Handeland said the announcement that needs to go out today as soon as possible saying Iditarod will happen and that there are trail concerns and the board of directions is looking at options and contingency plans and a decision is expected to be made on Tuesday.

Burmeister noted that we now have three options: the traditional route, re-start in Nenana or re-start in Fairbanks.

Swenson asked if there is enough snow in Anchorage for the Idita-Riders. Hooley said we think there is but are still trying to verify that.

Burmeister asked if we will allow the mushers to have more than one drop sled. Nordman said he'd have to take a look at that. He said the trouble normally is getting to Nikolai and he said he doesn't think we will have the sled trouble this year.

Swenson asked if Nenana would be treated like Knik, with truck access. Nordman said that would be true.

Seavey said we need to look at this vested interest business at the next board meeting.

Maxwell suggested that we make a copy of what it says in Roberts Rules of Order. He said it is very plain. Our business is governed under Roberts Rules of Order. Seavey said we ask him to divulge all he knows about this and then not let him participate in making a decision.

Swenson said it isn't to his advantage to be on the phone this morning. Seavey said it isn't to anyone's advantage to be on the phone. But we do it for the race.

Handeland said what Roberts Rules says is people are free to participate in discussion but they may not vote.

Koch noted that there will be discussion about conflict of interest after the race at a regularly scheduled board meeting.

Handeland suggested that we might need legal counsel on this.

Koch thanked the board members for their time.

The meeting adjourned at 9:40 a.m.