TESTIMONY HB 40

My name is Alyson Pytte, I’m a dog owner and daily user of public trails. I want to thank Representative Josephson for introducing House Bill 40, and the committee for creating this additional time for public comment. I also want to thank all the trappers who take it upon themselves, in the absence of any legal requirement, to locate their traps a safe distance from public trails.

Like many Alaskans, I often allow my dogs to run off leash. I expect that some of the members of this committee do as well. It is one of the many pleasures of living in Alaska. I have not personally experienced the horror of a dog caught in a trap, but it is of constant concern to me. Every time I read about a new incident in the paper I avoid the area where it occurred. But the truth is it can happen anywhere, anytime.

The Alaska Legislature recently passed a law empowering judges in divorce cases to take into account the best interests of pets in custody disputes in Alaska. That law, which had solid bipartisan support, was an acknowledgement of what we all know to be true: in modern life, pets are important members of the family, we love them dearly, and their happiness and well-being are important to us.

Public sentiment about trapping near trails has evolved in a similar direction. I believe there is now broad support among Alaskans for the types of reasonable restrictions set out in House Bill 40. If this bill were in the form of ballot initiative, I believe it would pass. If another year goes by without action by the legislature, perhaps a ballot initiative is what is needed. Year after year we read the terrible stories of pets injured and killed in traps, sometimes in front of children, and yet nothing is done. Now is the time. There is a lot of anger and divisiveness in our country right now, and when an easy opportunity for compassionate action presents itself, we should take it.

House Bill 40 imposes minimal burdens on trappers, and in the end it will benefit trappers by providing clear guidance and discouraging the reckless placement of traps, which only leads to suffering and bad press. Because a conviction under the bill requires proof of criminal intent, there is no risk that a trapper will be punished for an honest mistake.

I do think there are small ways the bill could be improved. I would respectfully encourage the committee to make more explicit that the bill applies not just to the State Park system but also to public trails in State Game Refuges, general state lands, municipal lands, and federal parks and refuges in Alaska. A second consideration would be to require traps to be marked with a trapper’s permit number or similar identifier so that illegal traps can be noted and removed without violating laws that prohibit tampering with legally set traps. Third, I would personally support increasing the distance from 200 feet to at least 500 feet – while at the same time recognizing that the 200 feet restriction is the product of a difficult political compromise.

Thank you again for considering my testimony, and for taking action on a public safety issue of importance to all Alaskans.