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Beavis

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- (54) **SNOWMOBILE SKID FRAME ASSEMBLY**
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B62M 27/02 (2006.01)

B62D 55/07 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**

CPC **B62M 27/02** (2013.01); **B62D 55/07** (2013.01); **B62M 2027/025** (2013.01); **B62M 2027/026** (2013.01); **B62M 2027/027** (2013.01); **B62M 2027/028** (2013.01)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**

CPC .. **B62M 2027/026**; **B62M 27/02**; **B62D 55/07**
See application file for complete search history.

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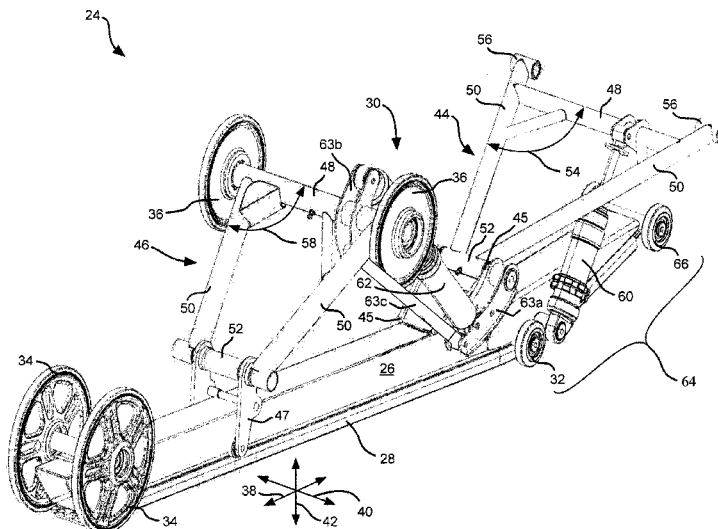
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(57)

ABSTRACT

A skid frame for a snowmobile is disclosed including a generally planar skid surface extending between front and rear idler wheels. The front and rear idler wheel are offset from one another and define a longitudinal direction. A track encircles the skid frame having the skid surface positioned over a center of the track such that a major longitudinally extending portion of the track that is coextensive with the skid surface has first and second unsupported lateral portions on either side of the skid surface. The first and second unsupported lateral portions extend in the horizontal direction at least 25 percent of a width of the track. A suspension arm member may mount the skid rail and include mount portions for mounting to a tunnel and spanning a distance at least twice the width of the longitudinal beam.

19 Claims, 23 Drawing Sheets



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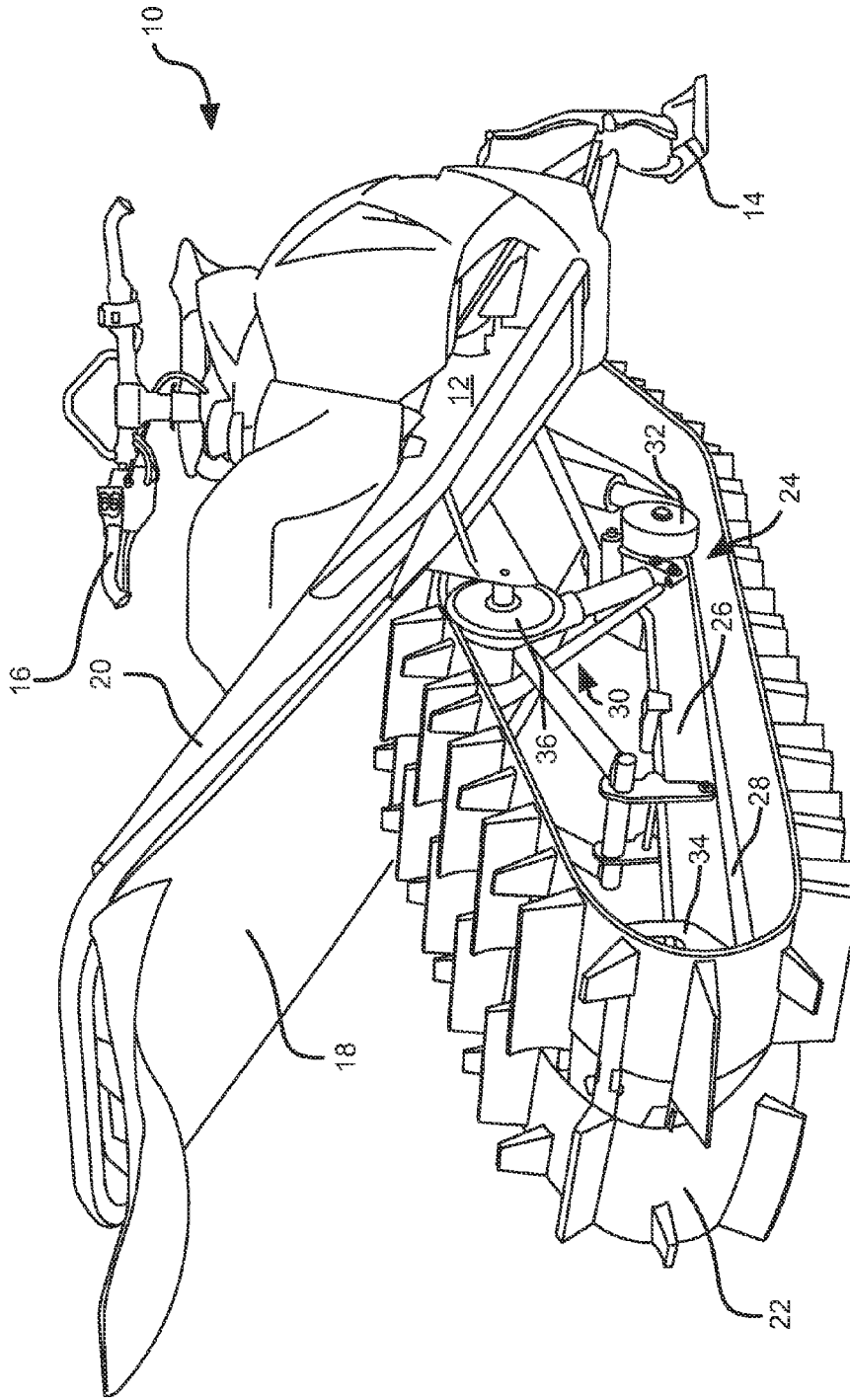


Fig. 1

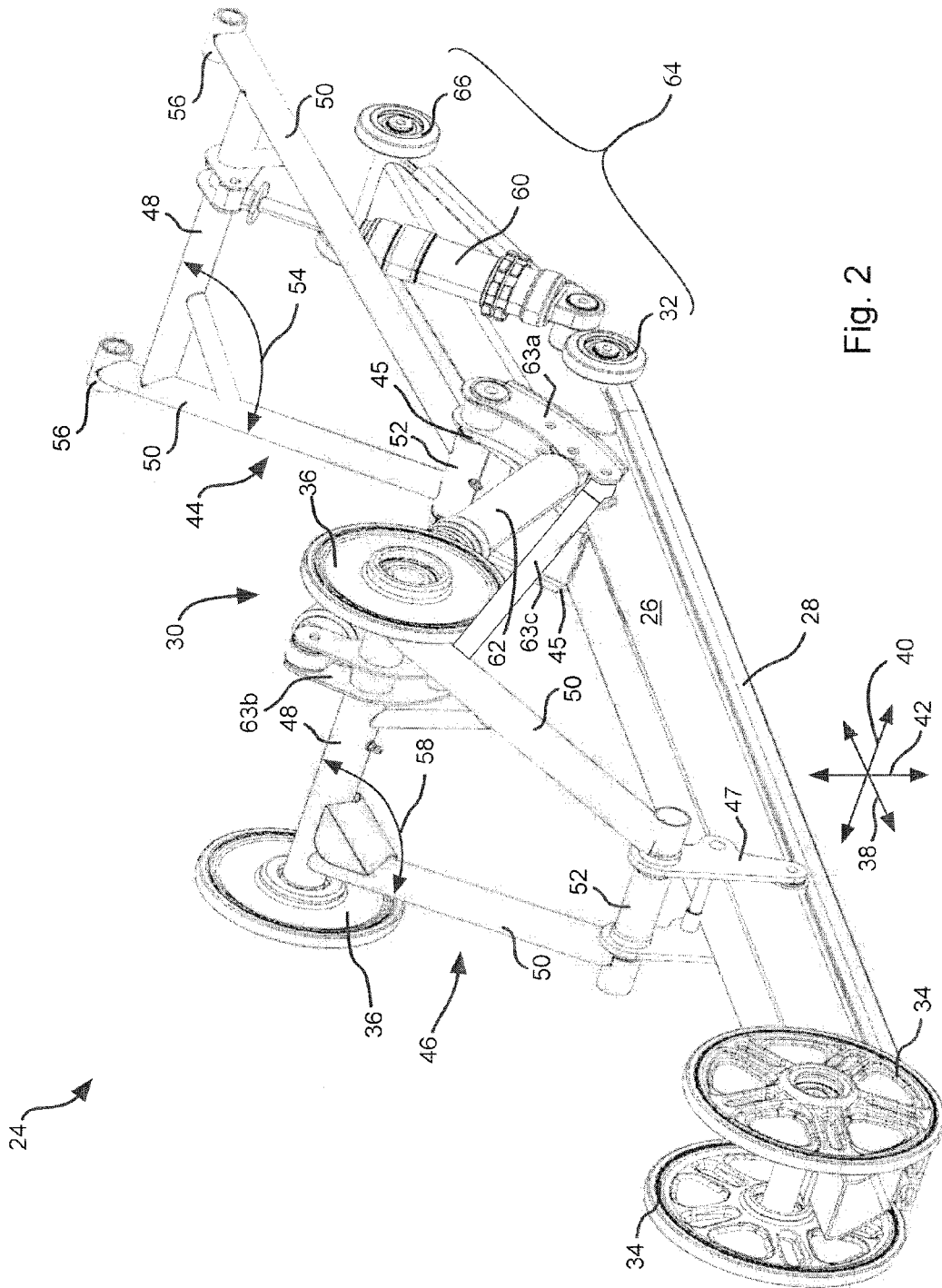


Fig. 2

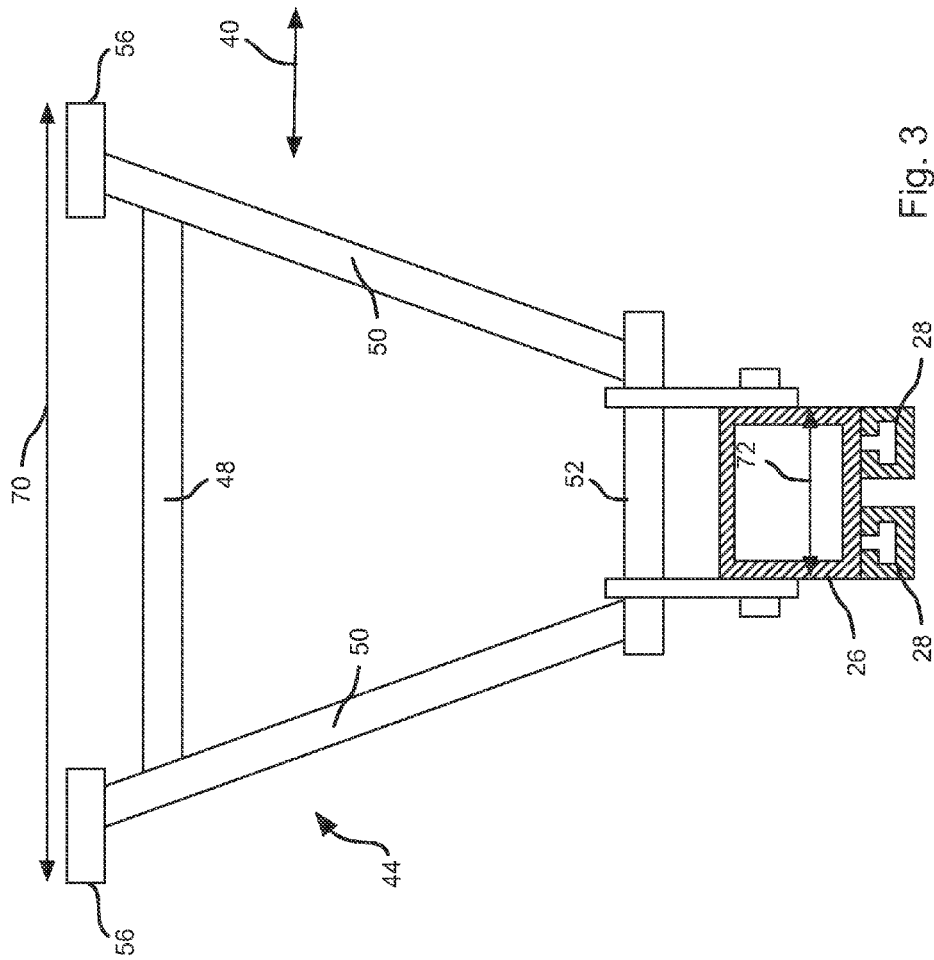


Fig. 3

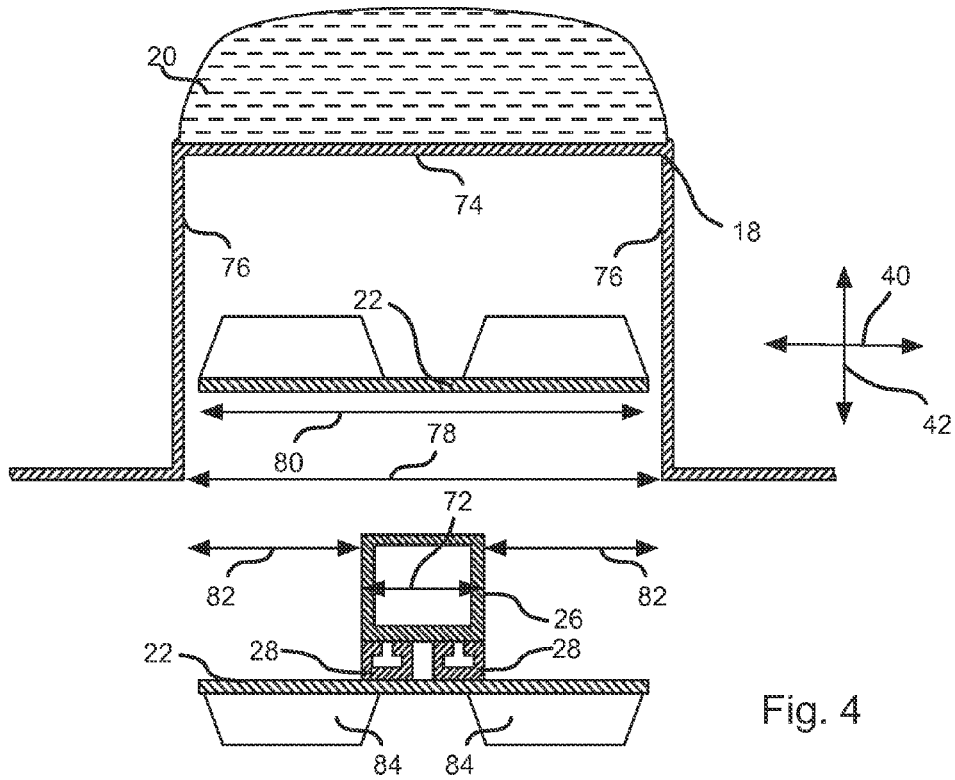


Fig. 4

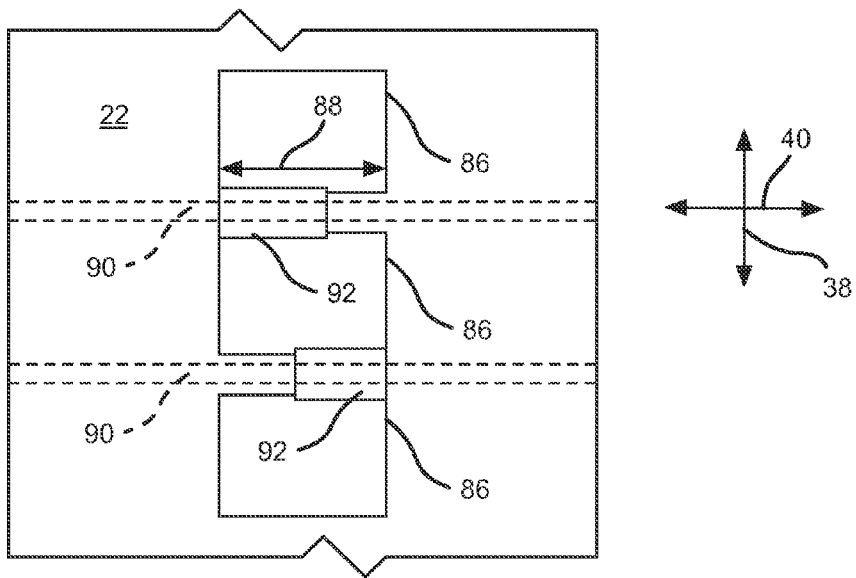


Fig. 5A

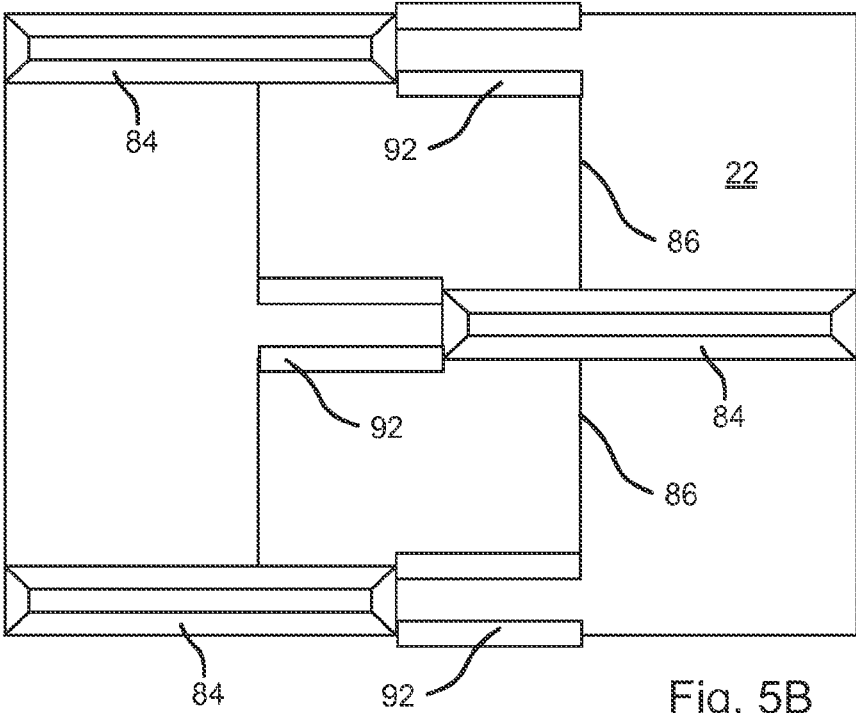


Fig. 5B

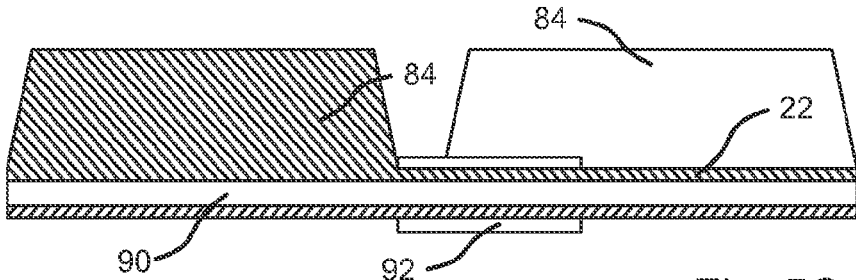


Fig. 5C

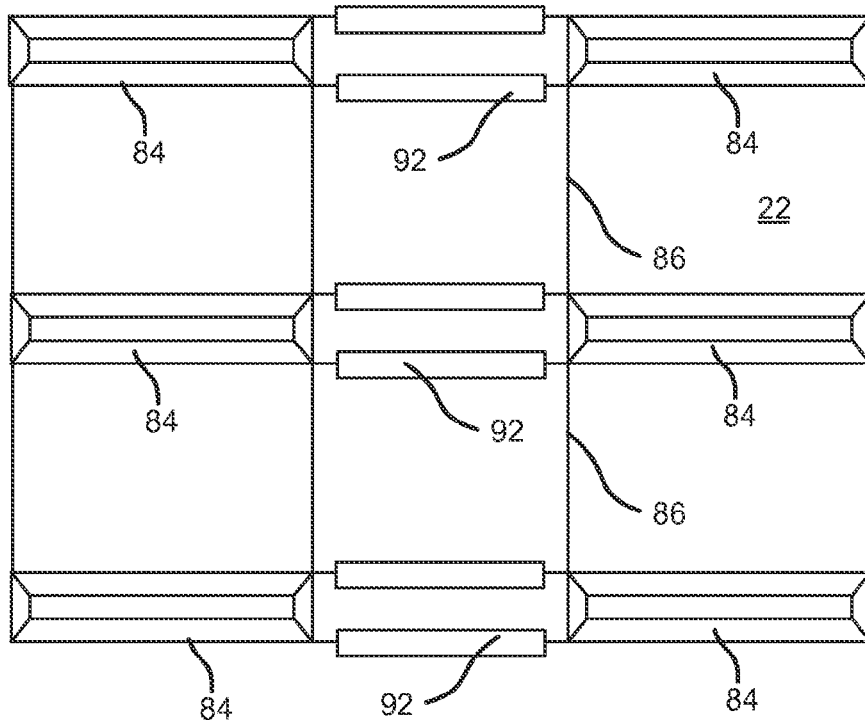


Fig. 5D

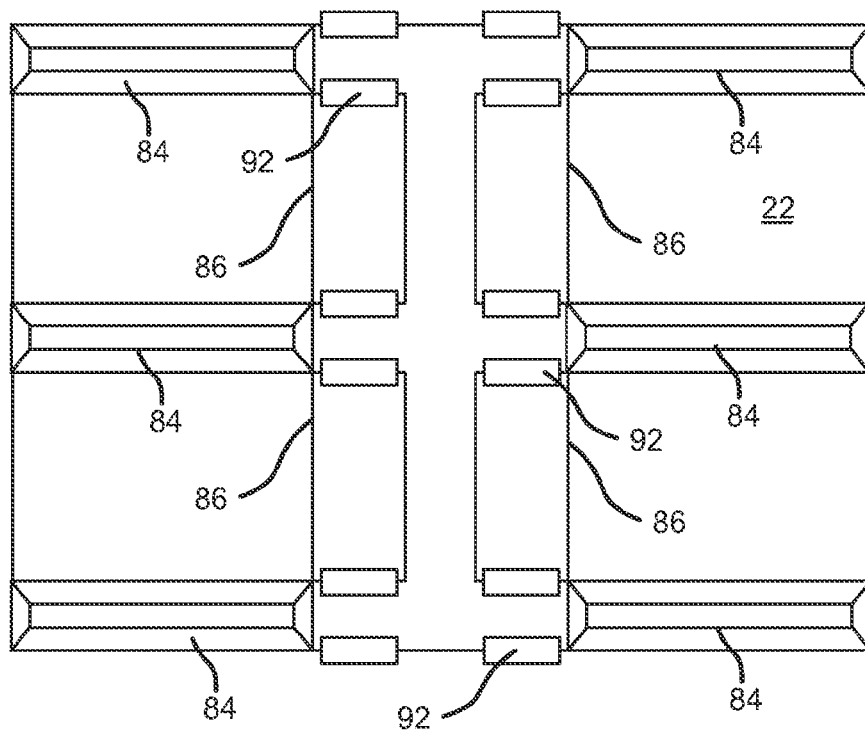


Fig. 5E

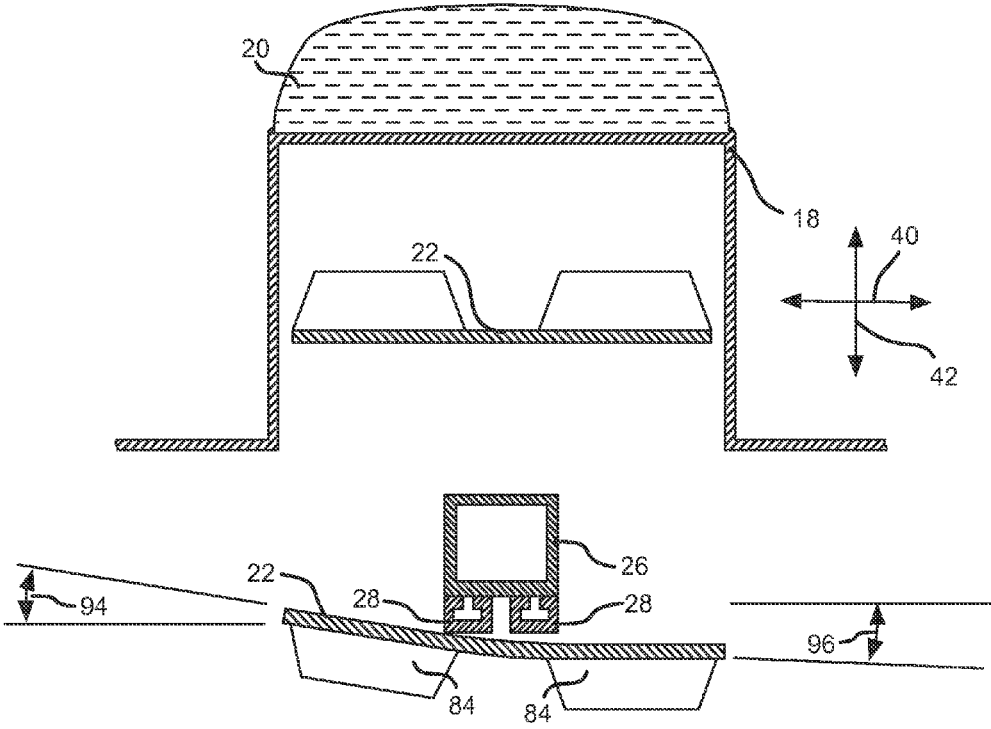


Fig. 6A

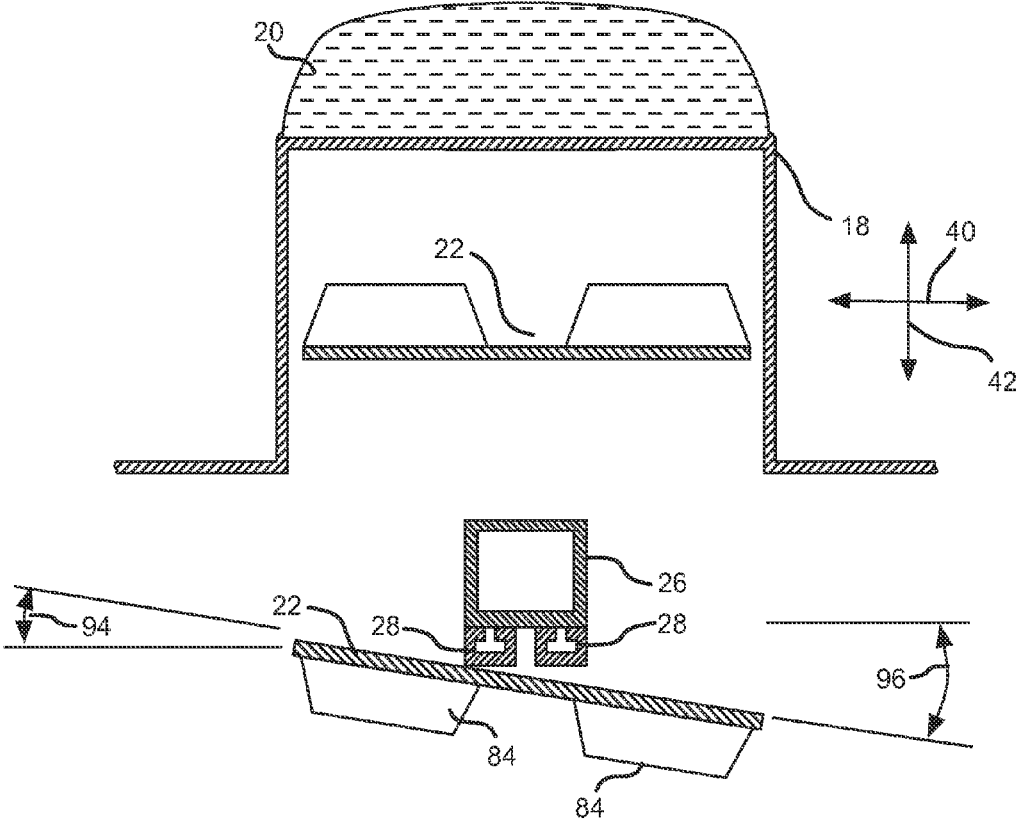


Fig. 6B

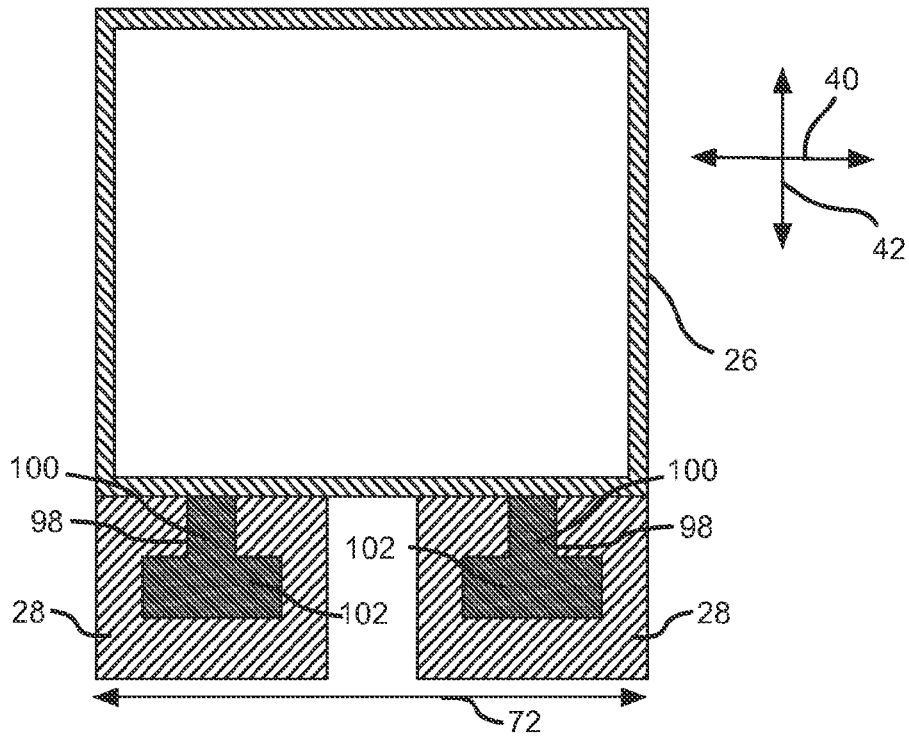


Fig. 7A

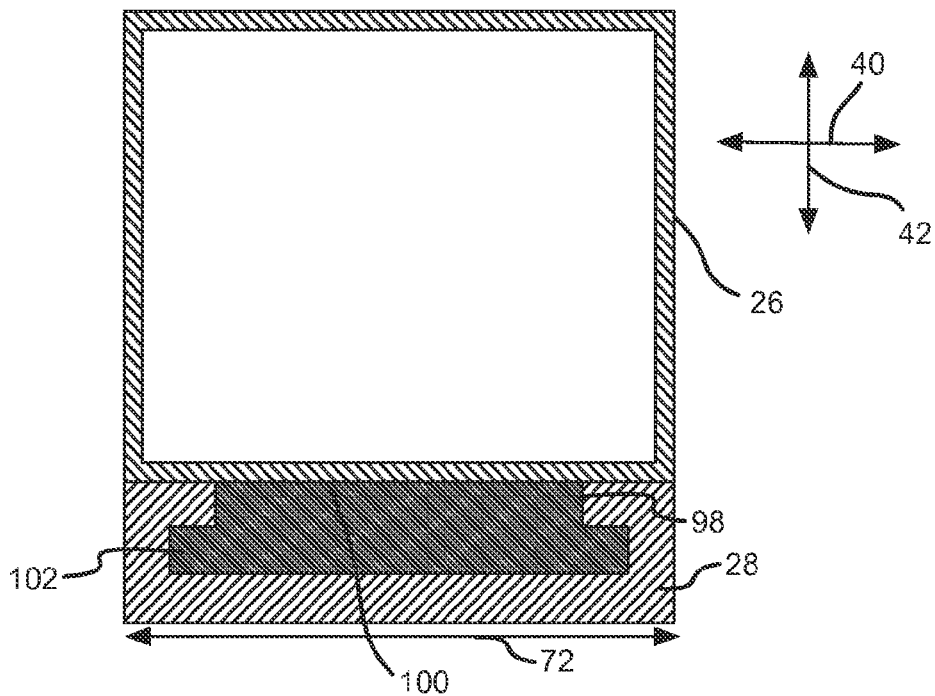


Fig. 7B

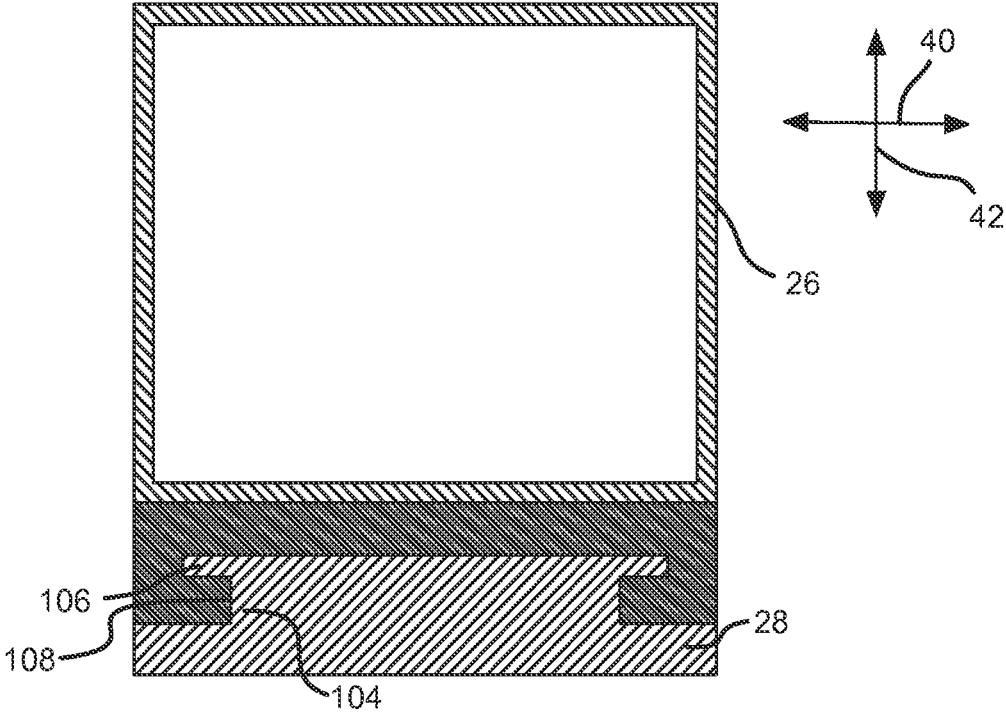


Fig. 7C

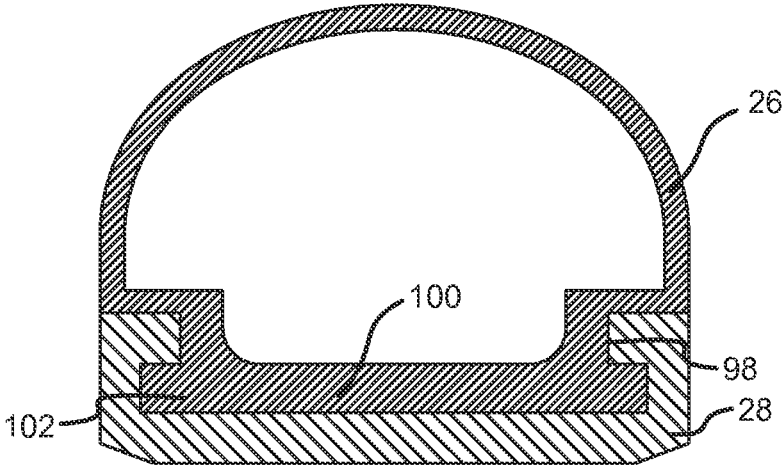


Fig. 7D

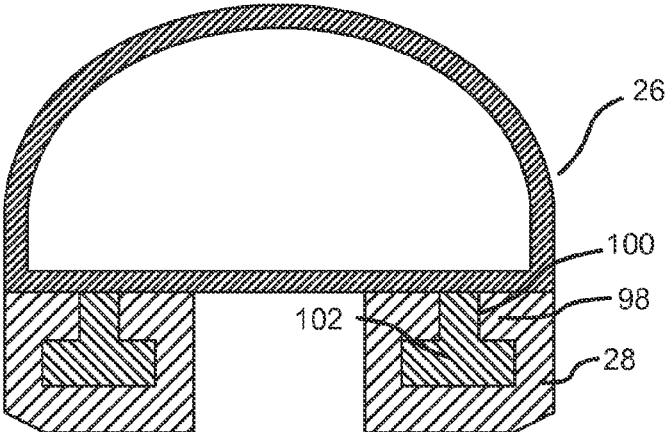


Fig. 7E

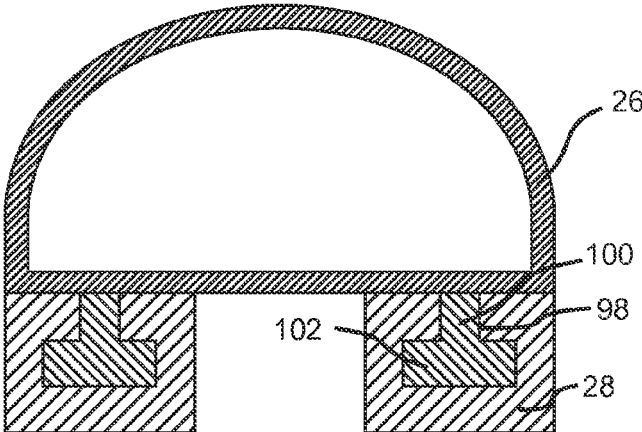


Fig. 7F

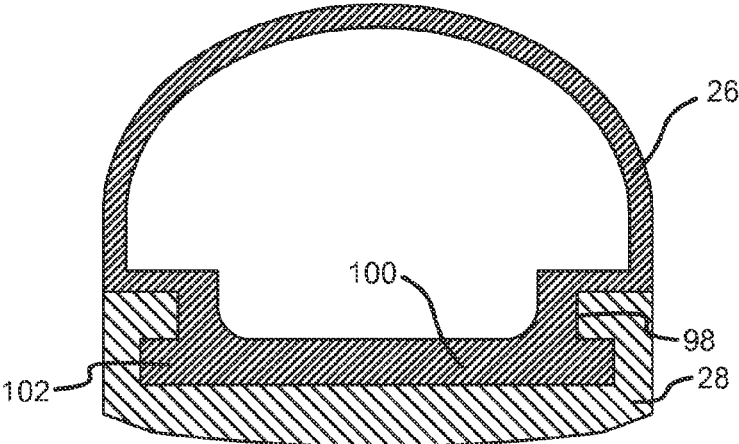


Fig. 7G

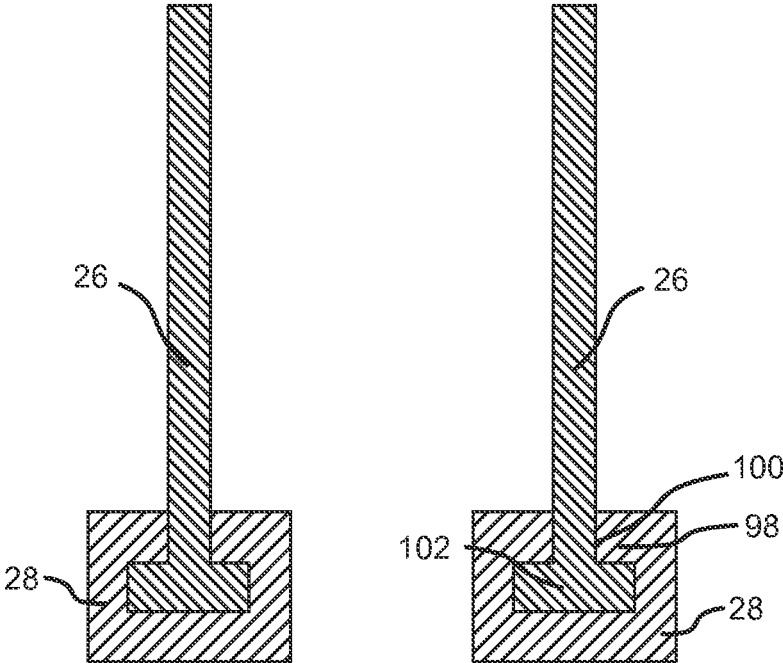


Fig. 7H

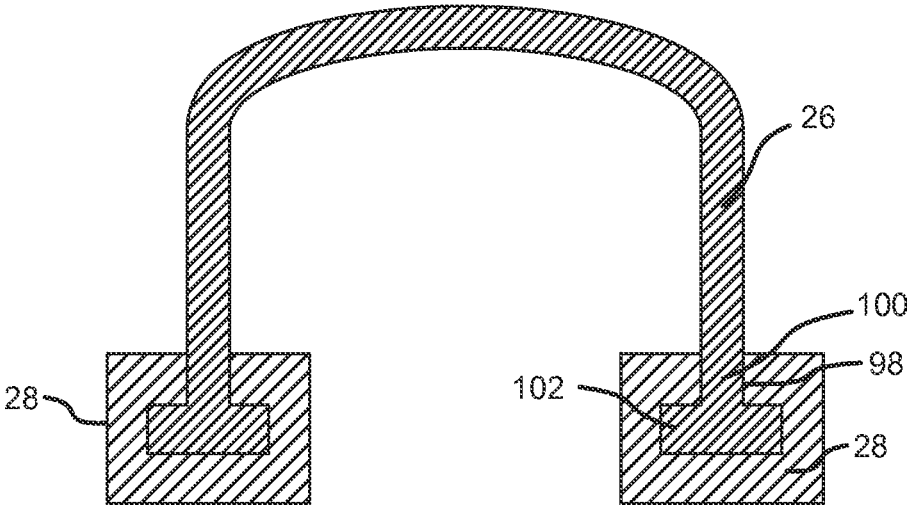


Fig. 7I

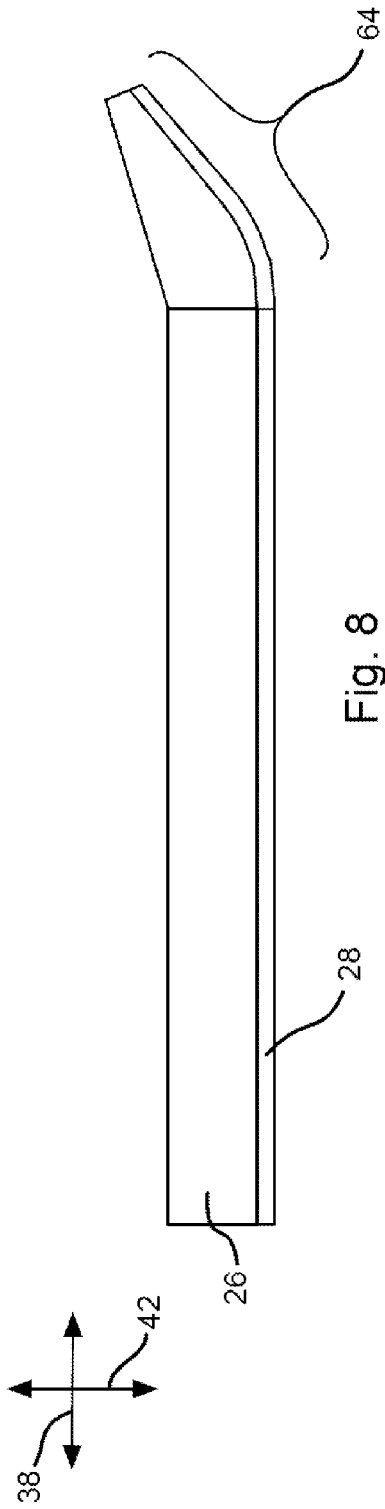


Fig. 8

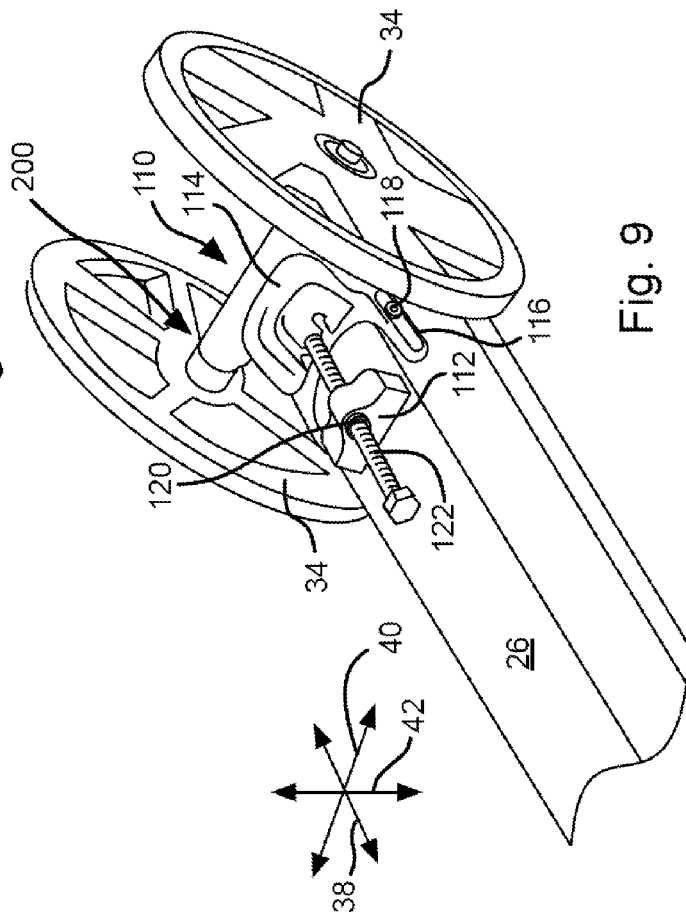
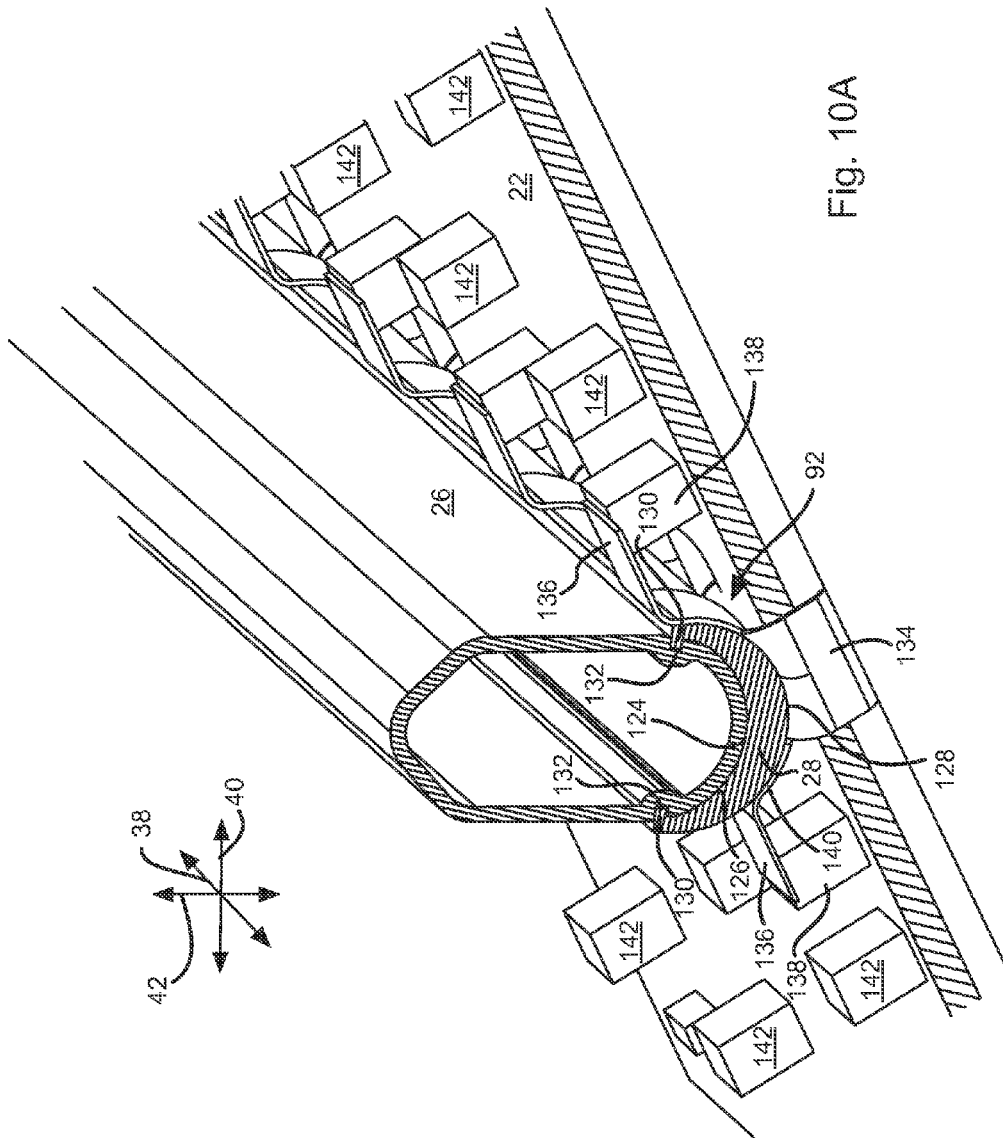


Fig. 9



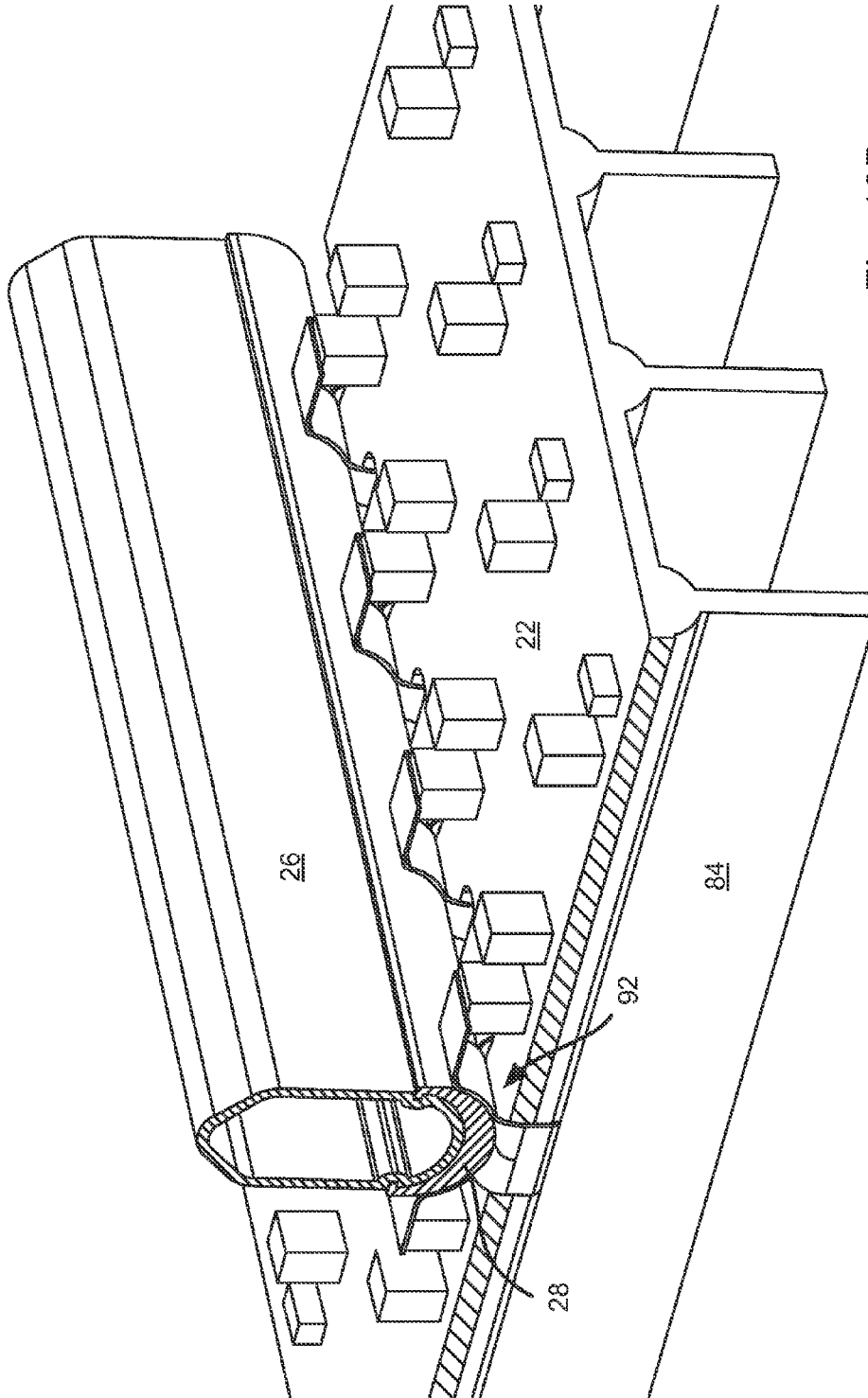


Fig. 10B

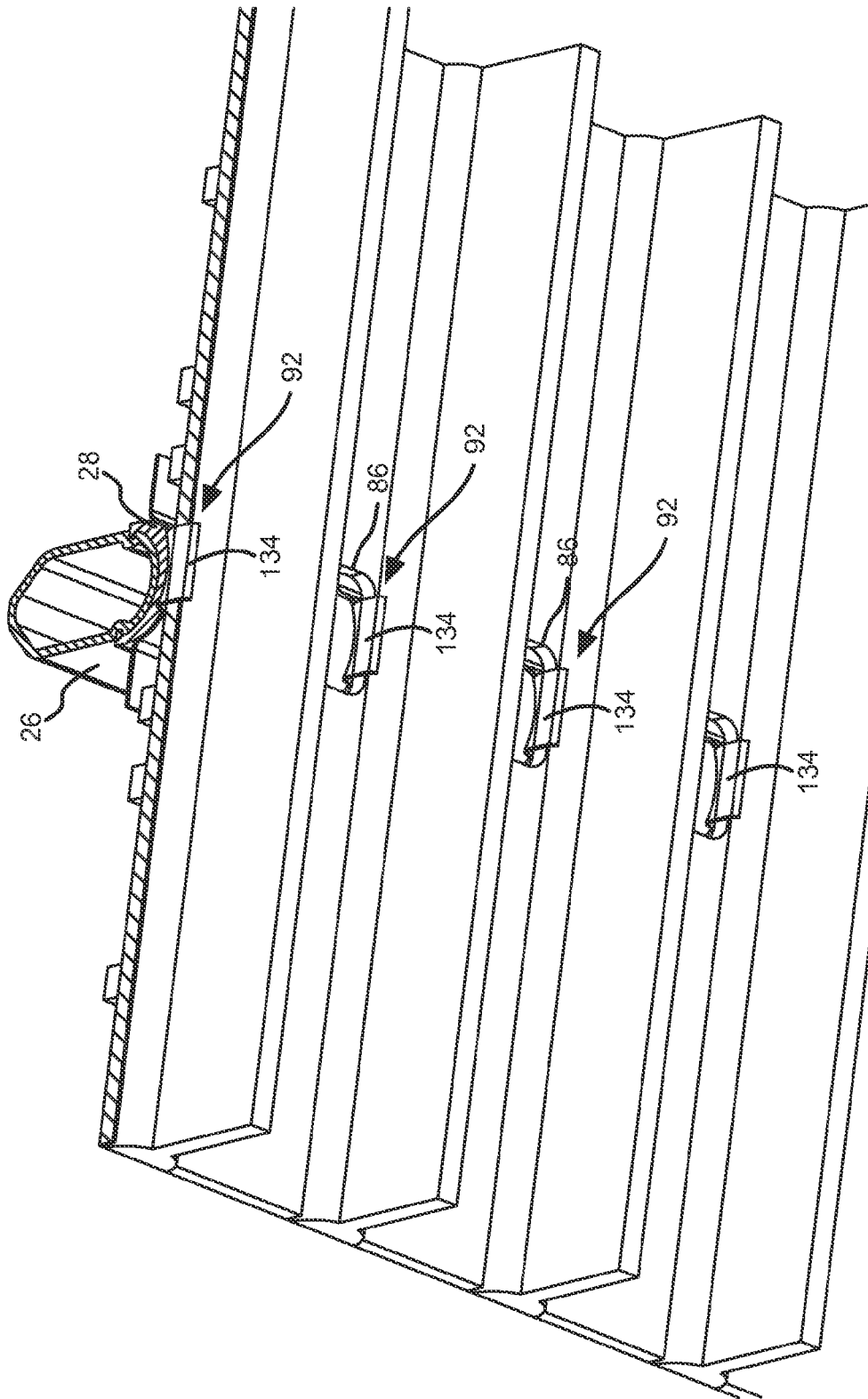
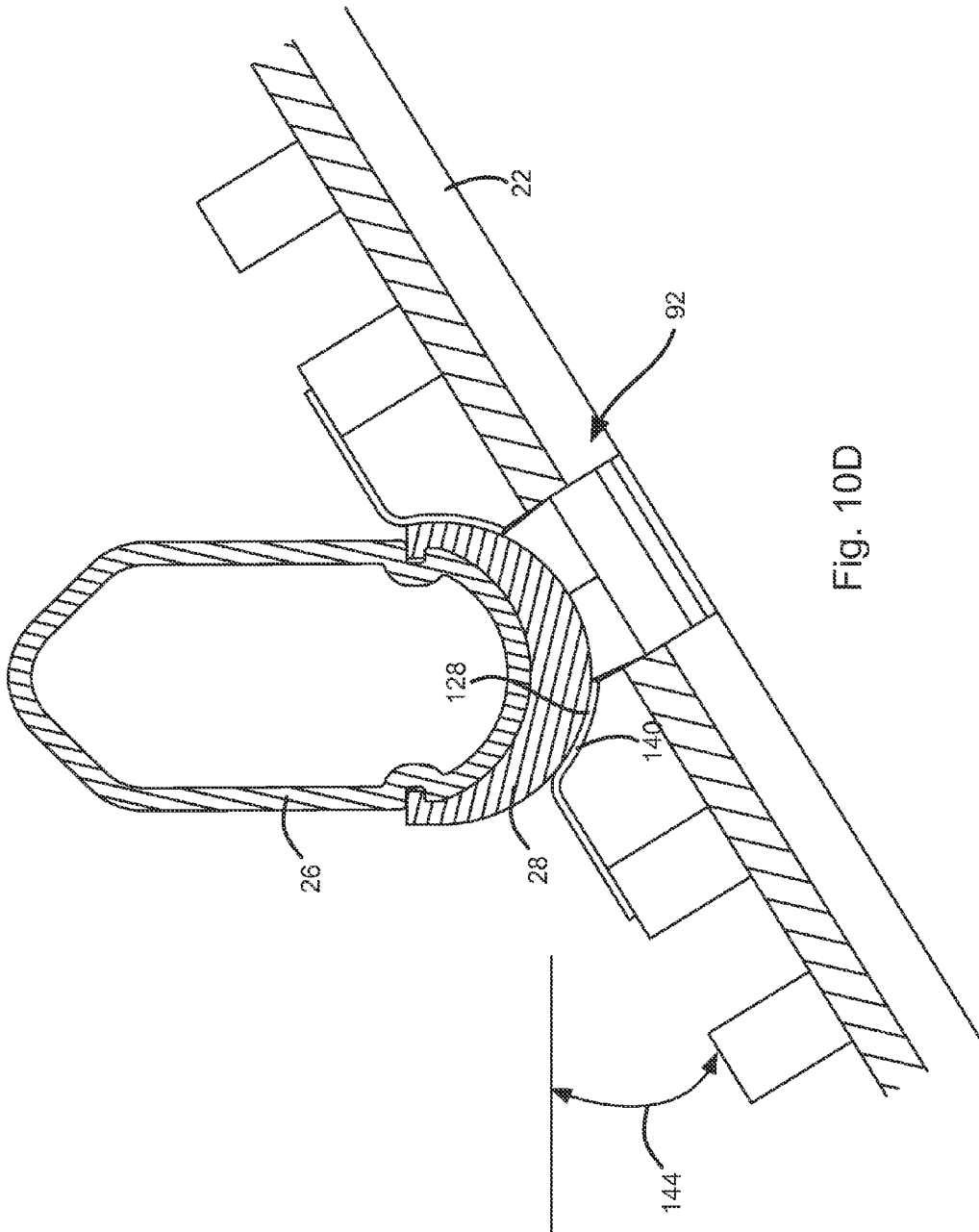


Fig. 10C



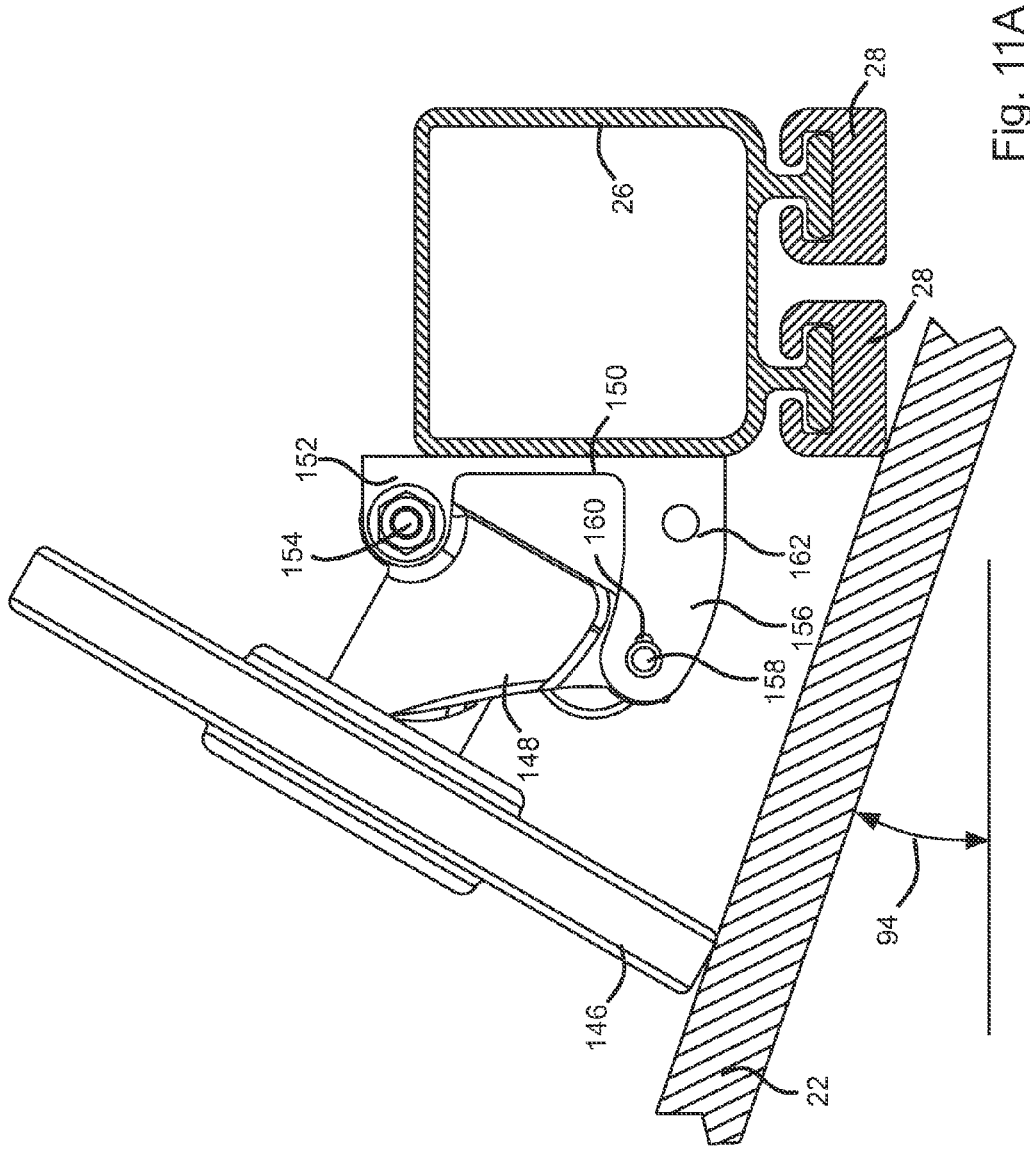
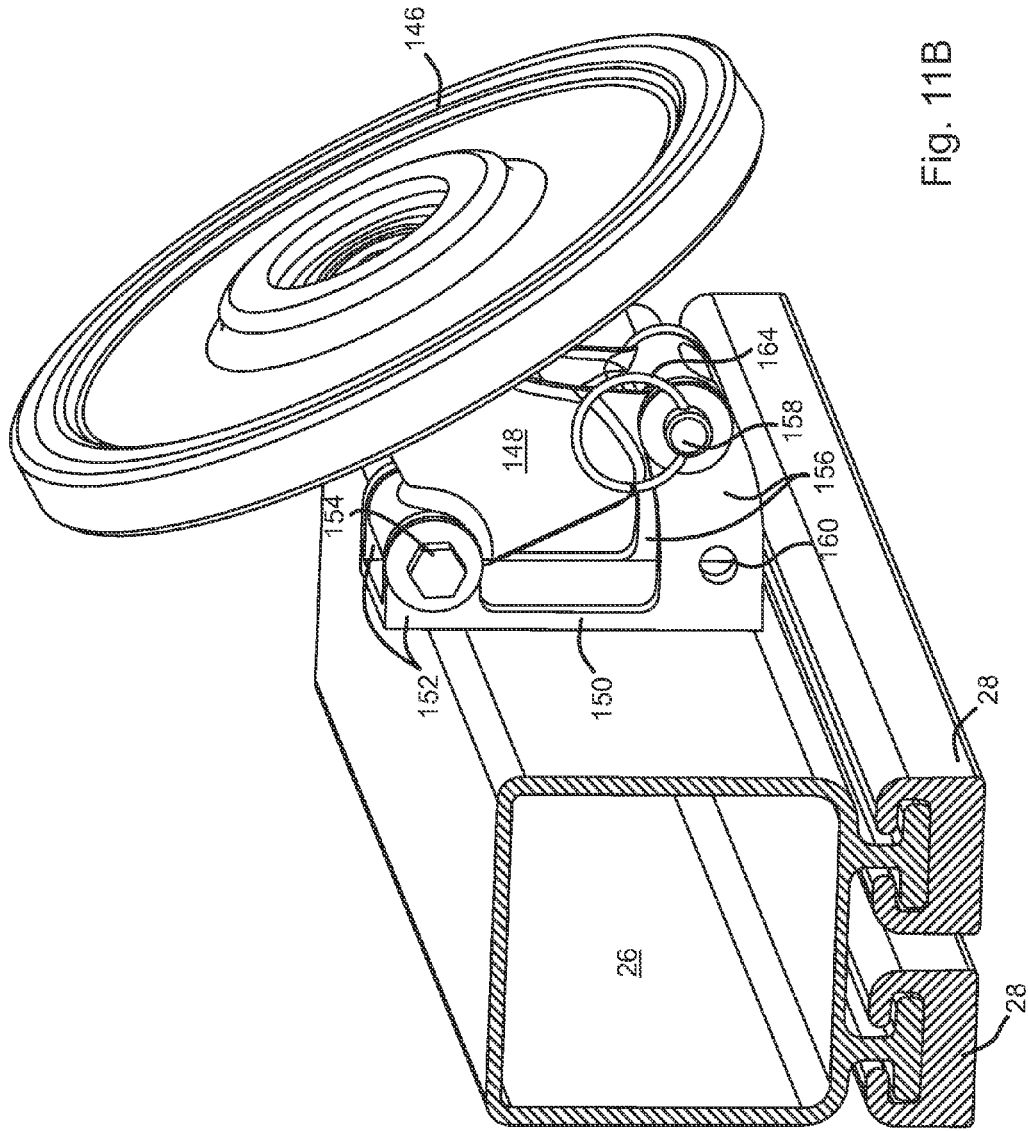


Fig. 11A



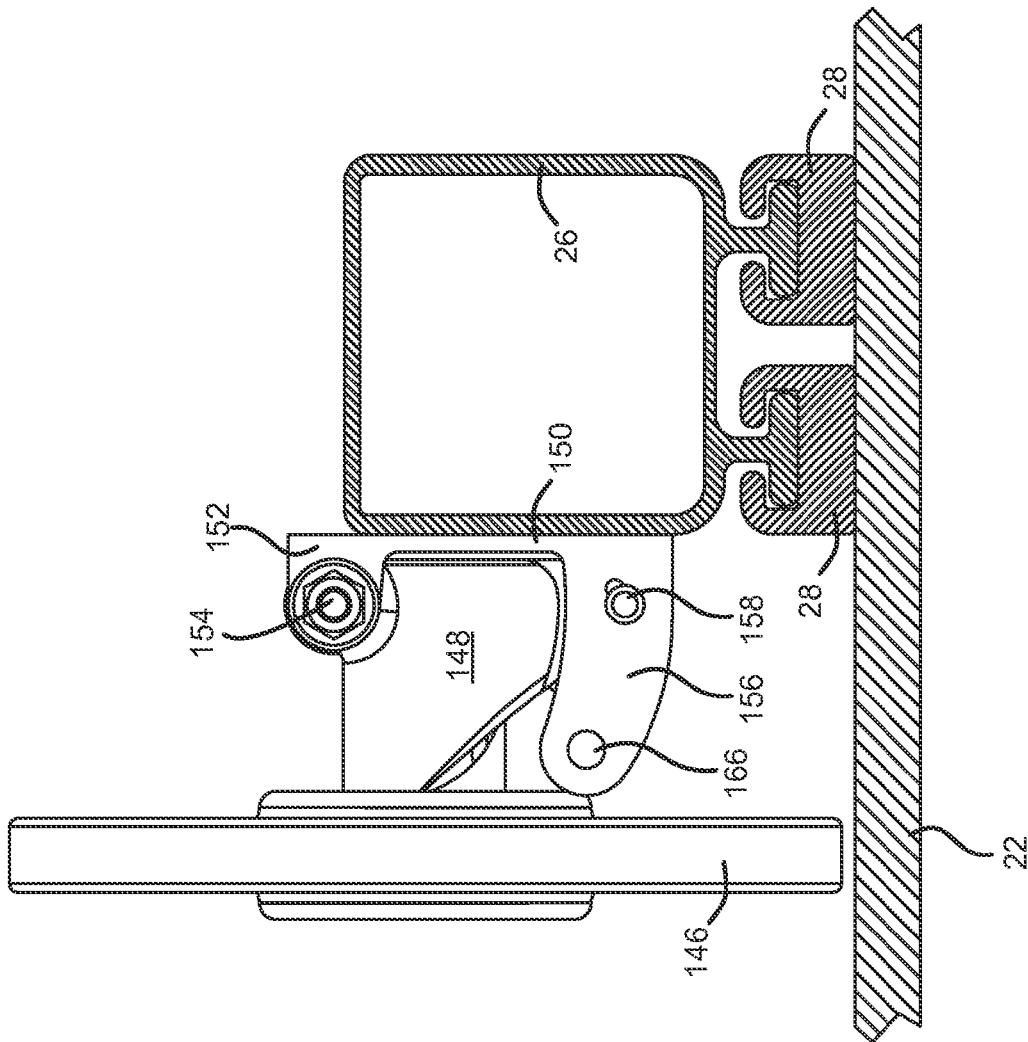


Fig. 11C

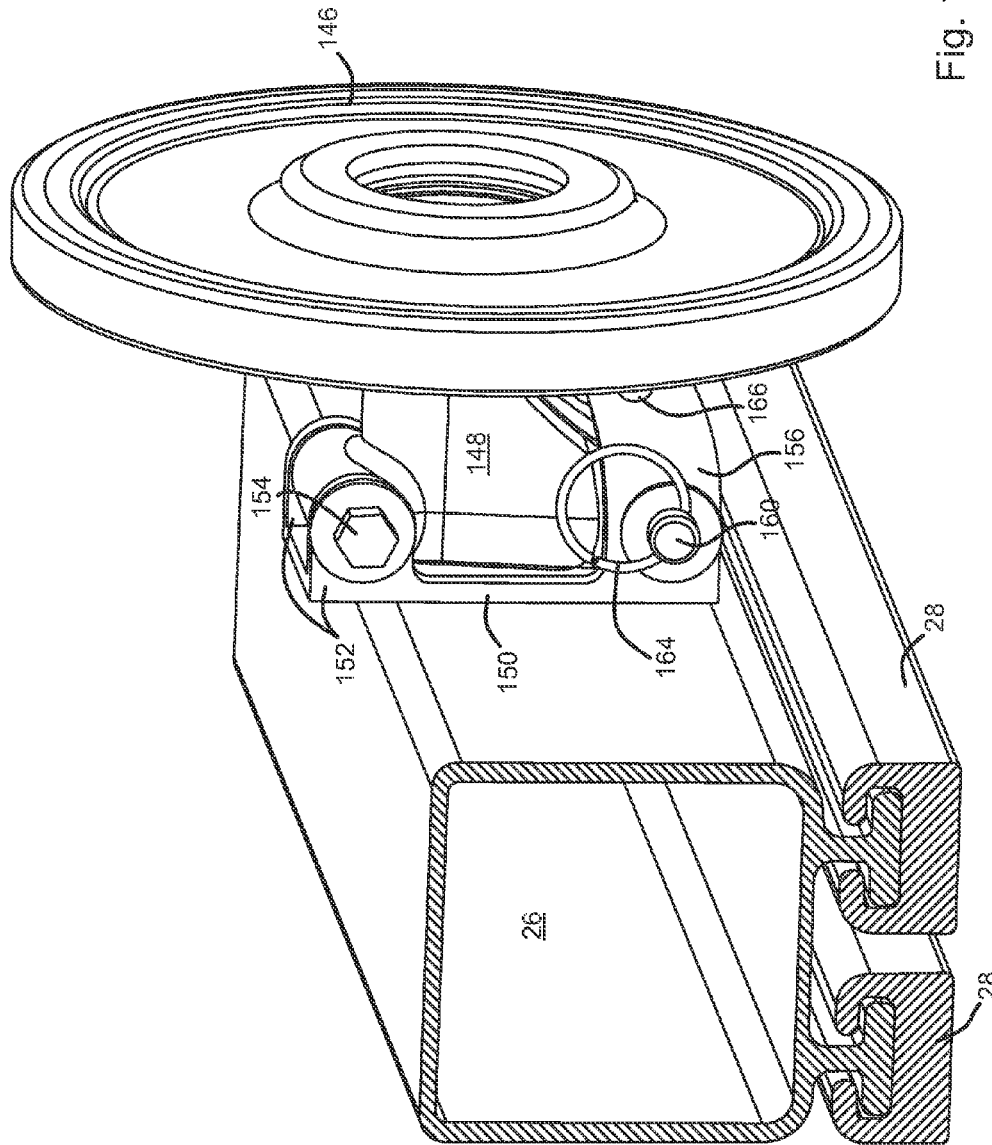


Fig. 11D

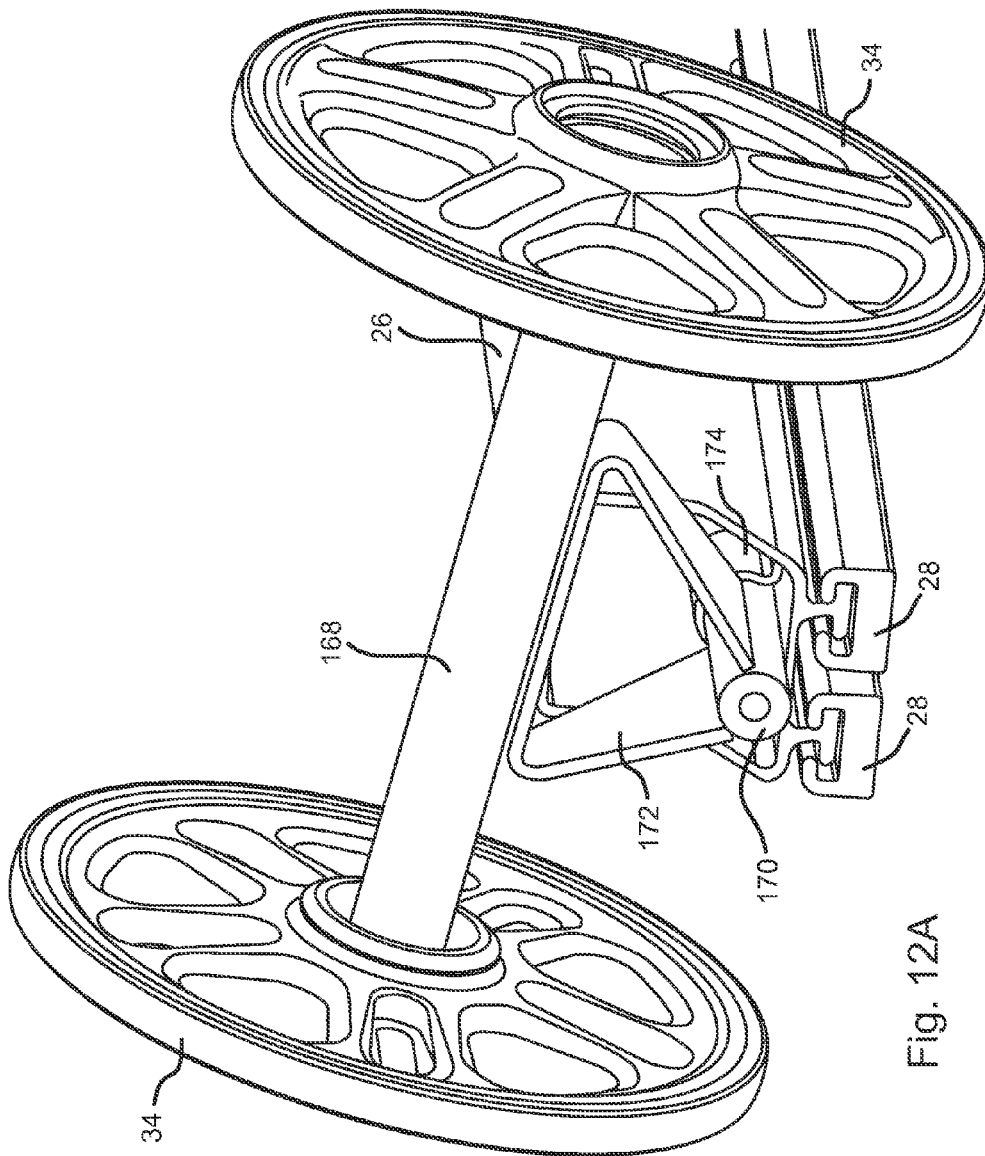


Fig. 12A

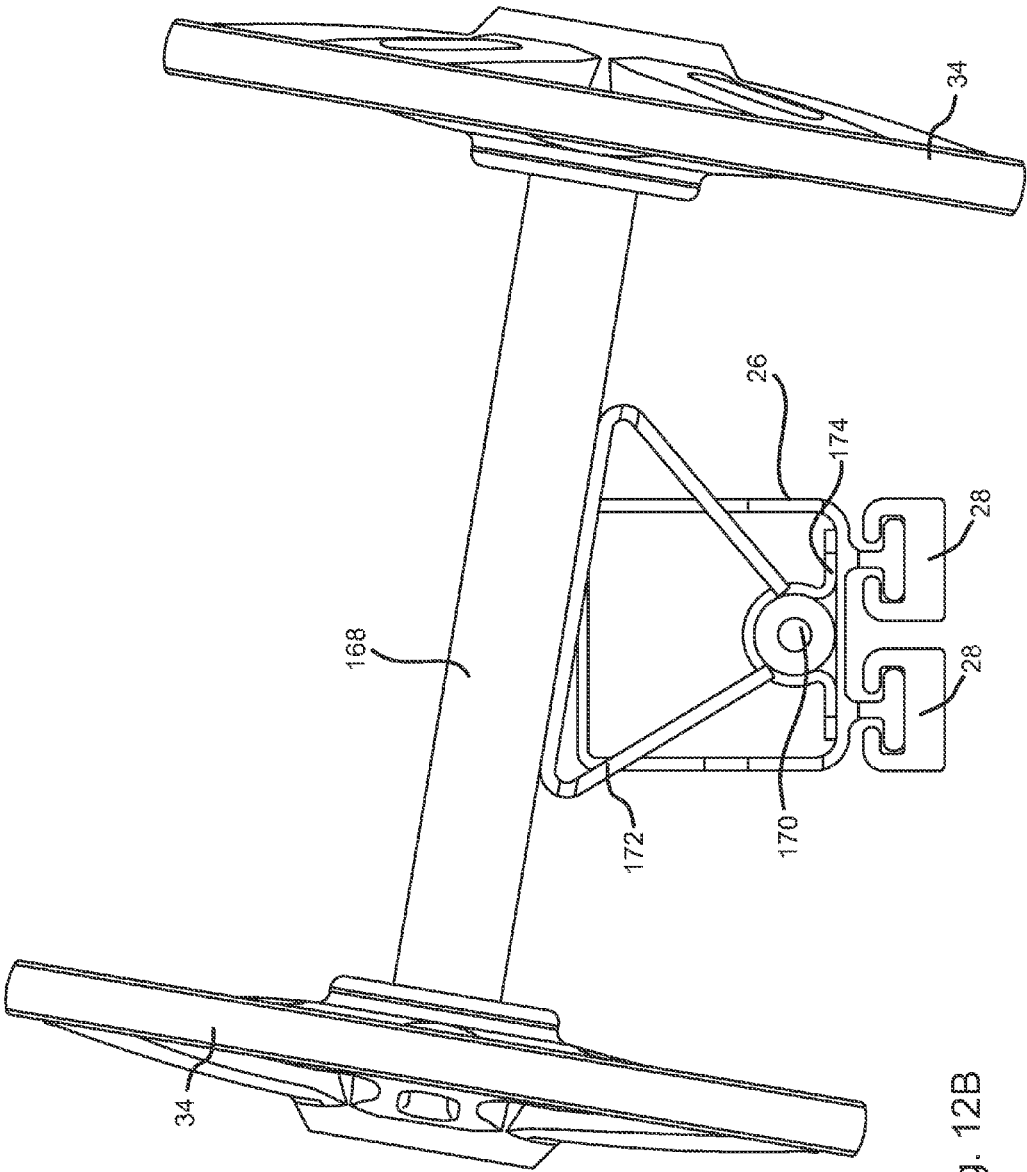


Fig. 12B

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SNOWMOBILE SKID FRAME ASSEMBLY

This application is a Continuation of U.S. application Ser. No. 14/109,760, filed on Dec. 17, 2013, and is incorporated herein by reference. A claim of priority to all, to the extent appropriate, is made.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This application relates to snowmobiles and, more particularly, to skid frames for supporting the track of snowmobiles.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Snowmobiles travel over snow by means of steerable skis and a track driven by the snowmobile's engine. In order to provide a large surface area in contact with the snow, a skid frame supports the track. The skid frame typically includes a number of idler wheels and a pair of rails offset from one another with wear-resistant material on the lower surfaces thereof. The rails maintain a portion of the track generally flat against the ground. The track may have metal clips with inward-facing smooth surfaces that ride along the wear-resistant material. The skid frame may additionally include a suspension system coupled to the chassis of the snowmobile in order to improve ride quality.

This application is directed to an improved skid frame for a snowmobile that provides improved handling characteristics.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In one aspect of the invention, a snowmobile includes a chassis including a tunnel. A skid frame is mounted to the chassis below the tunnel and includes a slide surface, a front idler wheel, and a rear idler. The front and rear idler wheels are offset from one another and define a longitudinal direction. The slide surface is generally planar along most of its length and extends along the longitudinal direction between the front idler wheels and the rear idler wheels. A track encircles the skid frame. The tunnel defines a recess having a width sized to receive an upper portion of the track. The slide surface is positioned over a center of the track such that a major longitudinally extending portion of the track that is coextensive with the skid surface has first and second unsupported lateral portions on either side of the skid surface. The first and second unsupported lateral portions each extend in a horizontal direction perpendicular to the longitudinal direction from an edge of the skid surface to an outermost edge of the track and have an extent in the horizontal direction of at least 25 percent of a width of the track.

In another aspect of the invention, the track defines a plurality of windows overlapping the center of the track. The windows have a combined width in the horizontal direction that is substantially equal to a width of the skid surface in the horizontal direction. The track may further include reinforcing members embedded in the track and extending in the horizontal direction between adjacent windows of the plurality of windows. Metal clips may be secured to the track between adjacent windows of the plurality of windows and have an inward facing surface engageable with the skid surface. The inward facing surface may have a width in the horizontal direction substantially equal to the width of the plurality of windows.

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In another aspect of the invention, the skid frame includes a longitudinal beam defining a lower surface for receiving at least one wear strip. The longitudinal beam has a width in a horizontal direction perpendicular to the longitudinal axis of the longitudinal beam. Front idler wheel receivers are secured to a first end portion of the longitudinal beam and rear idler wheel receivers are secured to a second end portion of the longitudinal beam. The lower surface extends between the front and rear idler wheel receivers. A frame member has a first mount portion pivotally secured to the longitudinal beam and second mount portions configured to secure to a chassis of a snowmobile. The second mount portions span a mount separation distance in the horizontal direction that is at least twice the width of the longitudinal beam. The first mount portion and longitudinal beam are substantially centered between the second mount portions.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Preferred and alternative examples of the present invention are described in detail below with reference to the following drawings:

FIG. 1 is a perspective view of a snowmobile in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 2 is an isometric view of a skid frame assembly in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 3 is a rear-elevation view of a front suspension arm secured to the rail in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 4 is a cross-sectional view of a snowmobile chassis in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 5A is a top plan view of a portion of an inward facing surface of a snowmobile track in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 5B is a top plan view of a portion of an outward facing surface of a snowmobile track in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 5C is a front cross-sectional view of a snowmobile track in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 5D is a top plan view of an outward facing surface of an alternative embodiment of a snowmobile track in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 5E is a top plan view of an outward facing surface of another alternative embodiment of a snowmobile track in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIGS. 6A and 6B are cross-sectional views of a snowmobile chassis during side-hill operation in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIGS. 7 A-7I are cross-sectional views of a skid rail and wear strips of a skid frame in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 8 is a side elevation view of a skid rail in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 9 is an isometric view of a tensioning system for a skid rail in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIGS. 10A-10D illustrate a rocking skid rail in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIGS. 11A-11D illustrate a device for limiting flexing and twisting of a track in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention; and

FIGS. 12A-12B illustrate pivoting rear idler wheels in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

Referring to FIG. 1, a snowmobile 10 includes a chassis 12 housing an engine. The chassis 12 may have steerable

skis **14** (or runners **14**) coupled thereto. The skis **14** are coupled to handlebars **16** and are steerable in response to changes in angle of the handlebars **16**. A corresponding second ski **14** (not shown) having a mirrored configuration to that of the illustrated ski **14** may be located on an opposite side of the snowmobile **10** and likewise be coupled to the handlebars **16** and steerable thereby. A tunnel **18** is part of the chassis and extends rearwardly with a seat **20** secured to an upper surface thereof. The tunnel **18** defines a space for receiving a portion of a track **22** driven by the engine of the snowmobile **10**.

A skid frame assembly **24** is encircled by the track **22**. The skid frame both (1) maintains a portion of the track **22** in contact with the ground and (2) provides a suspension **30** for enhancing ride quality of the snowmobile **10**. The skid frame assembly **24** may include a skid rail **26** having one or more wear strips **28** secured to a lower surface thereof. The track **22** slides along the wear strips **28**. Idler wheels **32, 34** (e.g., front idler wheels **32** and rear idler wheels **34**) secure to the skid rail **26** longitudinally offset from one another such that portion of the track **22** between the idler wheels **32, 34** is pressed against a driving surface by the rail **26** and wear strips **28**. The idler wheels reduce the friction of the track at bends in the travel of the track as it moves around the skid frame assembly **24**. The portion of the skid rail **26** between the idler wheels **32, 34** may have a substantially flat lower surface, e.g. deviate vertically from a straight line extending between the idler wheels **32, 34** by less than 5 percent, preferably less than 1 percent, of the distance between the idler wheels **32, 34**. Other idler wheels, such as the upper idler wheel **36** guide the track over the suspension arms and maintain tension in the track **22** in response to compression of the suspension **30**. For purposes of this disclosure, unless otherwise noted, the word “substantially” may mean “within 5 percent of,” preferably “within 1 percent of.”

FIG. 2 illustrates an exemplary skid frame assembly **24**. The skid frame assembly **24** may be understood with respect to a longitudinal direction **38** that generally corresponds to a direction of travel of the snowmobile **10**, the direction that the track slides along the wear strip **28**, or a line passing through the idler wheels **32, 34**. A horizontal direction **40** may be defined as perpendicular to the longitudinal direction **38** and parallel to a lower surface of the wear strip **28** or a surface over which the snowmobile **10** is traveling. A vertical direction **42** may be defined as being perpendicular to the longitudinal direction **38** and horizontal direction **40**.

The suspension **30** of the skid frame assembly **24** may include a front arm **44** (e.g., suspension arm member) and a rear arm **46**, also referred to as an idler arm **46**. The front and rear arms **44, 46** may each include an upper horizontal member **48**, vertical supports **50** extending downwardly from the upper horizontal member **48**, and a lower horizontal member **52** secured to lower end portions of the vertical supports **50**. As is apparent in FIG. 2, the vertical supports **50** span the vertical extent between the upper horizontal members **48** and the lower horizontal members **52** but are not necessarily themselves parallel to the vertical direction **42**. The lower horizontal member **52** may pivotally mount to the skid rail **26**. In the illustrated embodiment, the front arm **44** pivotally secures to the skid rail **26** by means of an intervening member such as by pivotally securing to one or more brackets **45** rigidly secured to the skid rail and extending vertically above the skid rail **26**. Likewise, the idler arm **46** may be secured to the skid rail **26** by pivotal securement to a rear arm **47** that is pivotally or rigidly secured to the skid rail **26**. As shown in FIG. 2, the vertical supports **50** of the front arm **44** define an included angle **54** with respect to the

upper horizontal member **48**. The included angle **54** is less than 90 degrees, preferably less than 80 degrees, and more preferably less than 70 degrees. As described in greater detail below, the skid rail **26** and wear strip **28** are substantially narrower than the track **22** and the tunnel **18**. Accordingly, acute angle **54** is effective to span the difference between the width of the tunnel **18** and the width of the track **22**. The vertical supports **50** may have tunnel mounts **56** secured to upper end portions thereof for securing to the tunnel **18** or some other portion of the chassis **12**.

The vertical supports **50** of the rear idler arm **46** may likewise define an acute angle **58** with respect to the upper horizontal member **48**. The idler wheels **36** may be coupled to the upper horizontal member **48**. The separation between the idler wheels **36** may be smaller than a width of the tunnel **18**. Accordingly, the angle **58** may be less acute than the angle **54**.

The front arm **44** may be coupled to the skid rail **26** by means of a shock absorber **60** that resists rotation of the front arm **44**. Likewise, the idler arm **46** may be coupled to the skid rail **26** by means of shock absorber **62** that resists rotation of the idler arm **46**. For example, the shock absorber **62** may be pivotally secured at one end to a rocker arm **63a** that is pivotally mounted to the skid rail **26**. The rocker arm **63a** may pivotally mount directly to the skid rail **26** or by means of pivotal securement to lower horizontal member **52** of the front arm **44**, e.g. to an outboard end thereof. The shock absorber **62** may be pivotally secured at an opposite end to a rocker arm **63b** pivotally secured to the upper horizontal member **48** of the idler arm **46**. A link **63c**, e.g. rod, may also be pivotally secured to the rocker arm **63a** and the rocker arm **63b**. As shown, the shock absorber **62** is pivotally secured to the rocker arm **63a** between the points of securement of the link **63c** and the lower horizontal member **52** to the rocker arm **63a**. For the upper rocker arm **63b**, the point of securement to the upper horizontal member **48** is between points of securement of the link **63c** and the shock absorber **62** to the rocker arm **63b**. As shown in FIG. 2, due to the narrowness of the skid rail **26** and its vertical extent, the shock absorbers **60, 62** may be positioned to one side of the skid rail **26**. Likewise, the rocker arms **63a, 63b**, and link **63c** may be located on the same side of the skid rail **26**. The illustrated configuration of the suspension **30** is merely illustrative. Various other suspension **30** configurations may also be used with the skid rail **26** configuration described herein.

In some embodiments, the skid rail **26** has a forward end portion **64** that is one or both of tapered and tilted upward with respect to the remainder of the skid rail. Other than the forward end portion **64**, the skid rail **26** may have a constant cross section, such as a rectangular box beam shape. In the illustrated configuration, anti-stab wheels **66** secure to the forward end portion **64**.

Referring to FIG. 3, the forward arm **44** may define a spanning distance **70** between outer faces of the tunnel mounts **56** (e.g., tubes in the embodiment of FIG. 2). Likewise, the skid rail **26** may define a width **72**. The width **72** may be the width of the box beam forming the skid rail **26** or a distance between the outermost edges of a wear strip **28** or a set of wear strips **28** secured to the skid rail. In some embodiments, the distance **70** is at least twice the distance **72**, preferably at least three times the distance **72**. In some embodiments, the distance **70** is no more than four times the distance **72**. Referring to FIG. 4, the tunnel **18** may have a generally rectangular cross-sectional shape including a top surface **74** supporting the seat **20** and side panels **76** extending downwardly from the top surface. In some embodi-

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ments, the side panels 76 are perpendicular to the top panel 74. In other embodiments, the side panels 76 may flare outwardly. The tunnel 18 may define a width 78 sized to receive the track 22, i.e. greater than a width 80 of the track 22 plus some tolerance for sway in the track 22. For purposes of FIG. 4, widths are widths measured along the horizontal direction 40. The width 78 may be defined as the narrowest width of the tunnel that is longitudinally adjacent a portion of the track 22 at some point during operation. For example, the width 78 for a flared tunnel 18 may be the distance in horizontal direction 40 between the side panels 76 at the top panel 74.

The rail width 72 as defined above may be substantially less than the width 80 of the track. For example, the skid rail 26 may be positioned over the centerline and a portion of the track 22 may extend unsupported by the skid frame on either side of the skid rail 26 and the wear strip 28, or wear strips 28. The extent 82 of the unsupported portion on one side of the track may be at least 25 percent of the entire width of the track 22, preferably 30 percent, and more preferably 35 percent. The extent 82 of one side of the unsupported portion of the track 22 may be defined as a right or left portion of the track 22 extending outwardly from an outermost portion of the wear strips 28 (or single wear strip) in contact with the track 22 when the snowmobile 10 is positioned on a flat surface. Accordingly, the distance 72 between outward edges of the wear strips 28, or of a single wear strip when only one wear strip is used (e.g. see FIG. 7B), may be less than 50 percent, preferably less than 40 percent, and more preferably less than 30 percent, of the track width 80.

In some embodiments, the distance 72 is at least 50 percent of the width of the track 22, preferably 35 percent, and more preferably 25 percent. The unsupported portion may extend along a major portion, preferably substantially all of the track 22 extending in the longitudinal direction 38 between the idler wheels 32, 34 (See FIGS. 1 and 2). The unsupported portion may be completely unsupported and may not engage any other structure that would prevent flexing and twisting of the track 22. In some embodiments, the unsupported portion may be completely unsupported and not engage any other structure for some angular distance, e.g. at least 5 degrees, preferably 10 degrees, at which point some structure may prevent or hinder further flexing and/or twisting of the track 22.

Referring to FIGS. 5A to 5C, while still referring to FIG. 4, the track 22 may have lugs 84 secured thereto to improve traction with snow. The lugs 84 may be positioned on either side of windows 86 cut through the track 22 periodically along the centerline of the track 22. In some embodiments, the lugs 84 extend in the horizontal direction 40 partially across the windows 86 as apparent in FIG. 5B. The centerline of the track is a line located at the center of the track as measured along the horizontal direction 40. The centerline of the track extends through the windows 86. The windows 86 may serve to allow snow to pass through the track 22 in order to cool the one or more wear strips 28. The windows 86 may have a width 88 in horizontal direction 40 that is comparable to the width 72. For example, the width 88 may be +/-10 percent, preferably 5 percent, more preferably 1 percent, of the width 72. Portions of the track 22 between the windows 86 may have reinforcing members 90 embedded therein. The reinforcing members 90 may include, for example, fiberglass, metal, plastic, or some other material. The reinforcing members 90 resist flexing of the track while still allowing some flexing and urge the track 22 to both twist and flex in response to unbalanced loading.

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The portions of the track 22 between the windows 86, including the embedded reinforcing members 90, may be partially or completely surrounded by clips 92. The clips 92 may be formed of metal or other low friction material. An inward facing surface of the clips 92 engages the wear strips 28 and reduces wear and friction due to sliding of the track 22 over the wear strips 28. The width 88 may be selected such that the clips 92 extend completely or substantially completely across the wear strips 28, or set of wear strips 28. The clips 92 may extend completely or substantially completely across the window 86. As shown in FIGS. 5A through 5C, the clips 92 preferably have a staggered configuration and extend partially across the window 86, such that a clip 92 around one rod 90 is positioned closer to one side of the window 86 whereas the clip 92 on an adjacent rod 90 is positioned closer to an opposite side of the window 86. This staggered configuration may advantageously accommodate or facilitate a similar staggered arrangement of the lugs 74 extending partially across the window 86 as shown in FIG. 5B. As shown in FIG. 5B, one lug 84 may be positioned on one side of the row of windows 86 and extend partially across the width of the windows 86 from that side whereas an adjacent lug 84 may be positioned on an opposite side of the rows of windows 86 and extend partially across the width of the windows 86 from that side.

Referring to FIG. 5D, in some embodiments, the windows 86 and clips 92 may be substantially centered with respect to a width of the track 22. The clips 92 may extend parallel to the width of the track such that at least 50 percent, preferably at least 75 percent, and more preferably 100 percent, of the widths of the lower surfaces of the wear strips 28 contact the clips 92 as the track passes under the wear strips.

Referring to FIG. 5E, in another embodiment, parallel rows of windows 86 are defined by the track 22 and corresponding parallel rows of clips 92 are coupled to the track between contiguous windows of each row. The separation between the windows 86 and clips 92 along the width of the track 22 may correspond to a separation of the wear strips 28 in embodiments having two or more wear strips 28. The rows of windows 86 and clips 92 may be positioned such that each clip 92 contacts a wear strip 28 along at least 50 percent, preferably at least 75 percent, and more preferably 100 percent, of the width of that wear strip 28 as the track runs under the wear strip.

Referring to FIG. 6A, the configuration of the skid rail 26 and wear strips 28 with respect to the width of the track 22 may facilitate handling of the snowmobile. For example, when riding along a hill, it may be advantageous to drive with one ski (the uphill ski) engaged with the snow and the other ski (the downhill ski) elevated above the snow. However, it can be a difficult maneuver to tip the snowmobile to its uphill side. Furthermore, this orientation can be difficult to maintain while maneuvering up, down, or around obstacles. To do so, the orientation of the snowmobile relative to the hillside may need to be constantly adjusted. In some situations, the track 22 may not be sufficiently engaged with the snow to maintain forward movement of the snowmobile sufficient to maintain the snowmobile in this orientation.

The configuration described herein for the skid rail 26 and wear strips 28 enables flexing and/or twisting of the track 22 when riding along a slope. In this situation, the uphill side of the track 22 will flex upwardly by an angle 94. The downhill side of the track 22 may also flex downwardly by an angle 96. The angle 96 may be less than the angle 94 due to flexing of the track 22. In this manner, a greater area of

the track 22 and lugs 84 are maintained in contact with the snow. The small tipping adjustments of the snowmobile relative to the slope may also be more easily accomplished as the tipping is less abrupt—relying on some track twist and some track flex rather than just pivoting about an uphill rail of a conventional skid frame.

Referring to FIG. 6B, in some instances or embodiments, the track 22 may not substantially flex or bend during side hill use as shown. In such embodiments, the stiffness of the track 22 may be such that the angles 94, 96 for a portion of the track 22 may be substantially equal, e.g. within $\pm 10\%$, preferably within $\pm 5\%$, of equal to one another. This also depends on the slope of the side hill, the tightness of the track and the ability of any idler wheels to flex or follow the twisting of the track. In such instance with minimal track bending, the track is able to more closely follow the contour of the slope. This may lead to positive forward traction and even lateral traction, along with improved maneuverability.

Referring to FIG. 7A, in some embodiments, a skid rail 26 according to the embodiments described herein may have two or more wear strips 28 defining a skid surface. In such embodiments, the distance 72 may be defined as the distance between the outermost edges of the outermost wear strips 28. In some embodiments, the width of the skid rail is substantially equal to the distance 72. In some embodiments, the wear strips 28 may define a channel 98 and the skid rail 26 may have one or more rails 100 (e.g., wear strip receivers) extending longitudinally along the lower surface thereof. The rails 100 may have a widened end portion 102. The channel 98 receives the rail 100 and the widened portion 102 retains the wear strip 28 within the channel 98. The configuration of FIG. 7A advantageously allows a skid rail 26 according to the embodiments described herein to use wear strips 28 for conventional snowmobiles.

Referring to FIG. 7B, in still other embodiments, a single wear strip 28 spans the entire distance 72. Accordingly, a single rail 100 (e.g., wear strip receiver) with a widened end portion 102 may be received within a channel 98 defined by such a wear strip 28. Due to the width of the wear strip 28, fasteners may additionally or alternatively be used to secure the wear strip 28 to the skid rail 26. Referring to FIG. 7C, in another alternative embodiment, a wear strip 28 defines a rail 104 with a widened end portion 106 that is received within a channel 108 defined by or secured to the skid rail 26.

Although the skid rail 26 as shown has a rectangular box beam configuration, other cross sectional shapes may also be used. For example, the skid rail 26 beam may have a generally semi-circular-shaped portion and have a wear strip 28 mounted to a planar lower surface and a rounded upper surface as shown in FIG. 7D. The wear strip 28 of FIG. 7D may be securable to the skid rail 26 in the same manner as for FIG. 7B or 7C or some other means. In the embodiment of FIG. 7D the rail 100 for mounting the wear strip 28 is monolithically formed (preferably by extrusion) with the skid rail 26 beam. However, the rail 100 may be securable to the skid rail 26 by some other means such as fasteners, welds, or the like. As apparent in FIG. 7D, the lower surface of the wear strip 28 has a curved or convex configuration. The lower surface of the wear strips 28 of FIGS. 7B and 7C may be similarly curved in some embodiments. In embodiments having one or more wear strips 28, one or more of the wear strips may be curved or otherwise define a portion of a concave surface. As shown in FIG. 7E, a skid rail 26 with a rounded upper surface, or other cross-sectional shape, may be used with a pair of wear strips 28 and corresponding mounting rails 100 as for other embodiments disclosed

herein. The outward facing edges of the two or more wear strips 28 may be curved or chamfered to facilitate twisting and/or bending of a track engaging the two or more wear strips 28. As shown in FIG. 7F, in other embodiments, the two or more skid rails 28 have planar lower surfaces instead, without chamfering or rounding. As shown in FIG. 7G, a skid rail 26 having a square, rounded, or other cross section may have a single wear strip secured thereto in a similar manner to FIG. 7B or FIG. 7C. The wear strip may define a convex lower surface to facilitate twisting and/or flexing of the track 22 engaged thereby. The convex shape may be defined by one or both of chamfering or rounding at outer edges thereof and by a continuously contoured or rounded lower surface having a constant (e.g. circular) or varying (e.g. elliptical) radius of curvature.

In still other embodiments, the skid rail 26 may be embodied as two rails each having a wear strip 28 mounted thereto such as are used in a conventional snowmobile as shown in FIG. 7H. The two rails may be positioned close together such that the wear strips have the relationship to one another as for other embodiments disclosed herein. In such embodiments, the two rails may have supportive braces between them.

In some embodiments, the skid rail 26 has an open box beam shape, e.g. inverted U-shape, such that one wall thereof is removed as shown in FIG. 7I. In such an embodiment, the wear strips 28 may mount to exposed edges of the open box beam. In such embodiments, the two rails may have supportive braces between them. For any of the embodiments of FIGS. 7A through 7H, the skid rail 26 and structures engaging the variously embodied wear strips 28 may be co-extruded.

Referring to FIG. 8, as viewed from the side, the skid rail 26 is generally straight along the longitudinal direction 38. The skid rail 26 may advantageously be substantially straight along a major portion of the longitudinal extent thereof, e.g. between 75 and 80 percent of the length thereof. As noted above, a front-end portion 64 of the skid rail may slope upwardly and may also taper in a plane parallel to the longitudinal direction 38 and vertical direction 42. The wear strip 28 may extend along substantially the entire lower surface of the skid rail 26, including the front-end portion 64.

Referring to FIG. 9, in some embodiments, the track may be tensioned by adjusting a relative position of the rear idler wheels 34 to the skid rail 26. For example, a tensioning system 110 may be interposed between the rear idler wheels 34 and the skid rail 26. In the illustrated embodiment, the tensioning system 110 includes a rear tensioning body 114 that includes rear idler wheel receivers 200 having the idler wheels 34 pivotally mounted thereto and a front tensioning body 112 that mounts to an upper surface of the skid rail 26. The rear tensioning body 114 defines slots 116 positioned along opposing lateral surfaces (e.g. vertically and longitudinally extending surfaces) of the skid rail 26 and extending in the longitudinal direction 38. The tensioning system 110 may be symmetric such that a corresponding slot 116 may be positioned on an opposite side of the skid rail 26 and have a mirrored configuration to the illustrated slot 116. The rear tensioning body 114 may be secured to the skid rail 26 by means of fasteners 118 positioned within the slots and tensioned and positioned such that sliding movement of the fasteners 118 within the slots 116 is permitted.

The front tensioning body 112 may define a longitudinally extending aperture 120 that receives a threaded fastener 122, e.g. bolt having one end bearing against the rear tensioning body 114. The aperture 120 may be threaded such that

rotation of the fastener 120 will urge the fastener 122 longitudinally relative to the front tensioning body 112. The rear tensioning member 114 will therefore be constrained to move relative to the front tensioning body 112 and skid rail 26 in response to this rotation, thereby adjusting the tension in the track of the snowmobile.

Alternatively, the rear idler wheels (or a single rear idler wheel) may be situated between rail sides, instead of outboard of the rail sides. For this purpose, the rail may be split or have an opening for the wheel(s) at its rearward end.

Referring to FIGS. 10A through 10C, in some embodiments a skid rail 26 may have curved lower surface 124 that engages a corresponding concave surface 126 defined by the wear strip 28. The wear strip 28 may have a curved lower surface 128. The wear strip 28 may include ridges 130 that insert within grooves 132 positioned on opposite sides of the skid rail 26 in order to mount the wear strip 28 to the skid rail 26.

In some embodiments, the clips 92 may define a curved seat for receiving the curved lower surface 128 of the wear strip 28. For example, a clip 92 may include lower tabs 134 that partially encircle a portion of the track 22 in order to secure the clip 92, such as in the conventional manner for securing clips 92 to a track 22 as known in the art. Upper tabs 136 may rest on protuberances 138 or ridges extending inwardly from an inner surface of track 22. A curved portion 140 of the clip 92 extends between the tabs 136 and defines a seat for engaging the curved lower surface 128 of the wear strip 28 and permitting rotation of the skid rail 26 within the curved portion 140. As shown the tabs 126 having the curved portion 140 therebetween may be formed of a piece of metal bent to the illustrated shape. As is apparent in the FIGS. 10A and 10B, the curved lower surface 128 extends below the tabs 136. In some embodiments, additional protuberances 142 protrude outwardly from the inner surface of the track 22. The protuberances 142 may engage a sprocket coupled to an engine of the snowmobile 10 or some other structure for driving a track 22.

Referring specifically to FIGS. 10B and 10C, the lugs 84 may extend completely across the track 22 and may cross the clips 92 such that each clip is located over a lug 84. Alternatively, each of the lugs may extend only partially across the width of the track. Other fingers or lug shapes may also be molded into the track. In the illustrated embodiment, a single row of windows 86 are positioned between clips 92 and receive the tabs 134 thereof to secure the clips 92 to the track 22. However, multiple rows of windows may also be used. Referring to FIG. 10D, the configuration of FIGS. 10A-10C advantageously reduces resistance to rotation of the track 22, such as during side hill operation. For example, in response to a torsional force on the track 22, the track 22 may rotate an angle 144 while the curved lower surface 128 remains in engagement with the curved portions 140 of the clips 92. The angle 144 may be limited by the extent of the curved surface 128, e.g. the angular extent subtended by the curved surface 128. Rotation of the track 22 may be limited by engagement of the edge of the curved portion 140 with sides of the skid rail 26. In some embodiments, the maximum value for angle 144 is 45 degrees. In other embodiments the maximum value may be lower, such as 30, 20, or 10 degrees. The angle is preferably limited by the torsional resistance of the track and the idler wheels that guide the track.

Referring to FIGS. 11A through 11D, in some embodiments, adjustable stops, such as the illustrated structure, may be used to selectively limit or prevent twisting and/or flexing of the track 22 that is otherwise permitted according to the

foregoing embodiments. For example, a wheel 146 may be mounted to the skid rail 26, such as at an intermediate position between the rear idler wheels 34 and front idler wheels 32 or forward end of the skid rail 26. As shown in FIGS. 11A and 11B, the wheel 146 is positioned such that the track 22 engages the wheel rotation of the wheel 146 may also be oriented at the maximum angle 26, such as within +/-10%, preferably +/-5%, of the maximum angle 94 permitted at the longitudinal position of the wheel 146. The axis of rotation of the wheel 146 may be offset from the track 22 such that a portion of the wheel 146 engages the track 22 at a desired maximum angle 94. The wheel 146 may be longitudinally positioned at a point of maximum deflection of the track 22 in the absence of the wheel 146. The wheel 146 may be positioned substantially longitudinally centered on an unsupported span of the track 22 extending forward of the rear idler wheels 34. For example, the wheel 146 may be positioned within a window centered on the center of the unsupported span, the window having a longitudinal extent of 10%, preferably 5%, more preferably 1%, of the length of the unsupported span. As one example, the unsupported span may extend from the rear idler wheels 34 to any front idler wheels 32.

In the illustrated embodiment, the wheel 146 may be positioned in at least two different positions each having a different maximum angle 94. For example, the wheel 146 may secure to a mount 148 that pivotally engages a bracket 150 mounted to the skid rail 26, such as by means of screws, welds, or the like. For example a pair of upper flanges 152 may engage a pivot 154 passing through the mount 148. For example, the pivot 154 may be a bolt, pin, or other cylindrical structure that constrains the mount 148 to pivot thereabout. The axis of rotation of the pivot 154 may be aligned with the longitudinal direction or longitudinal axis of the skid rail 26.

A lower, or some other, portion of the mount 148 may be pinned to the bracket 150 in order to fix the mount 148 and wheel 146 at a specific angular position. For example, lower flanges 156 of the bracket 150 may receive a pin 158 that passes through the mount 148 thereby fixing the mount 148 and wheel 146 at the illustrated angular position. The pin 158 may include a detent 160 or other structure for maintaining the pin 158 in the illustrated position. As shown in FIG. 11B, a ring 164 or other handle secured to the pin 158 may be used by a user to remove the pin 158 and overcome the retention force of the detent 160. The lower flanges 156 may define one or more additional apertures 162 for receiving the pin 158 and fixing the mount 148 at a different angular position.

Referring specifically to FIGS. 11C and 11D, in some embodiments, the wheel 146 and mount 148 may be fixable in a position that does not substantially allow for pivoting or flexing of the track 22. For example, the pin 158 may be removed from an aperture 166 in the lower flange 156 and inserted through the aperture 162 as well as through the mount 148 to fix the wheel 146 in the illustrated position. As shown in FIG. 11C, the wheel 146 may be separated from the track 22 in the absence of deflection of the track 22. In this manner, when traveling over a planar surface, particularly firm snow or ice, the wheel 146 does not engage the track 22 and therefore does not introduce friction or drag. In some embodiments, a small angular deflection of the track 22 may be allowed, e.g. up to 5 degrees, preferably only up to 2 degrees, when the wheel 146 is at its lowest angular position. The wheels 146 may alternatively be elastically mounted to the rail, such that they can move upwardly under force from the track, but are biased downwardly. A spring

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(such as a coil spring, torsion spring, or elastomer) may be used to bias the idler wheel. The stiffness of the spring may be selected depending on the type of riding and terrain expected. The spring may be adjustable.

Referring to FIGS. 12A and 12B, in some embodiments, the rear idler wheels 34 may be allowed to pivot freely, or freely within a proscribed angular range responsive to torsional forces on a track 22. The wheels may alternatively be able to pivot, while being biased to a centered or neutral position. For example, an axle 168 or other structure including rear idler wheel receivers 200 (FIG. 9), to which the rear idler wheels 34 are rotatably mounted may be mounted to a pivot 170 having an axis of rotation aligned with the longitudinal direction (into the page of FIG. 12B) and/or the longitudinal axis of the skid rail 26. In the illustrated embodiment, a bracket 172 secures to the axle 168 and maintains the axle 168 offset vertically above the pivot 170. The pivot 170 may be a rod or axle and may pivotally mount to the skid rail at various positions by various pivotal mounting means. In the illustrated embodiment, the skid rail 26 is a hollow beam and the pivot 170 rotatably mounts to an inner surface thereof, such as the inner bottom surface thereof. In the illustrated embodiment, a bracket 174 defines a seating surface engaging the pivot and permitting rotation thereof is used. The bracket 174 may be secured to the skid rail 26 by means of welds, screws, or other fastening means. In operation, the track 22 engaging the rear idler wheels 34 will be in tension such that the pivot 170 may not be restrained against longitudinal movement (within a range) and be held in place by the tension of the track 22 instead.

While the preferred embodiments of the invention have been illustrated and described, as noted above, many changes can be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. In particular, although the embodiments described above relate to snowmobiles, other tracked vehicles for use on snow or other applications may also advantageously use the embodiments disclosed herein. Accordingly, the scope of the invention is not limited by the disclosure of the preferred embodiment. Instead, the invention should be determined entirely by reference to the claims that follow.

The embodiments of the invention in which an exclusive property or privilege is claimed are defined as follows:

1. A skid frame assembly, comprising:
 - a longitudinal skid rail positioned along a centerline of a skid frame assembly,
 - two or more idler wheels coupled to the skid rail; and
 - a suspension system, the suspension system coupled to at least one of the skid rail and idler wheels;
 - wherein at least a portion of the skid rail is hollow and wherein the suspension system includes at least one shock absorber positioned between at least two idler wheels, wherein the shock absorber is offset from the centerline of the skid frame assembly.
2. The skid frame assembly of claim 1, wherein the suspension system comprises one or more suspension arms.
3. The skid frame assembly of claim 1, wherein the two or more idler wheels comprise one or more front idler wheels and one or more rear idler wheels.
4. The skid frame assembly of claim 1, further comprising an endless track positioned over the centerline of the skid frame assembly and including at least one slide surface in contact with a wear strip secured to a lower surface of the skid rail, wherein the endless track includes first and second portions extending unsupported on either side of the slide surface.

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5. The skid frame assembly of claim 4, wherein the at least one slide surface comprises a plurality of slide surfaces and the at least one wear strip comprises a plurality of wear strips.

6. The skid frame assembly of claim 4, wherein the one or more shock absorbers are positioned within a width of the endless track.

7. The skid frame assembly of claim 4, wherein the two or more idler wheels include at least a first lower idler wheel and a second lower idler wheel, and wherein the first and second unsupported portions of the endless track extend in a longitudinal direction between the first lower idler wheel and the second lower idler wheel.

8. The skid frame assembly of claim 1, wherein the suspension further includes:

first and second suspension arm members, each having a first mount portion coupled to the longitudinal skid rail and second mount portions configured to be coupled to a chassis of a snow vehicle;

an upper horizontal member that extends laterally between the second mount portions of the first and second suspension arm members;

wherein an acute angle is defined between the suspension arm members and the upper horizontal member.

9. The skid frame assembly of claim 8, wherein the acute angle is less than eighty degrees.

10. The skid frame assembly of claim 8, wherein a distance between the second mount portions is greater than a width of the longitudinal skid rail.

11. A skid frame assembly, comprising:

a longitudinal skid rail positioned along a centerline of a skid frame assembly, the longitudinal skid rail having a wear strip attached thereto;

two or more idler wheels coupled to the skid rail;

an upper idler wheel; and

a suspension system, the suspension system coupled to at least one of the skid rail and idler wheels, the suspension system including a rear arm having a vertical support and an upper horizontal member coupled to the upper idler wheel, wherein the vertical support extends upward from the longitudinal skid rail, wherein an acute angle is defined between the vertical support and the horizontal member;

wherein at least a portion of the skid rail is hollow and wherein the suspension system includes at least one shock absorber positioned between at least two idler wheels.

12. The skid frame assembly of claim 11, wherein the two or more idler wheels comprise one or more front idler wheels and one or more rear idler wheels.

13. The skid frame assembly of claim 11, further comprising:

an endless track positioned over the centerline of the skid frame assembly and including at least one slide surface in contact with the wear strip secured to the skid rail wherein the endless track includes left and right unsupported portions extending in a horizontal direction to the right and left of the longitudinal skid rail.

14. The skid frame assembly of claim 13, wherein the one or more shock absorbers are positioned within a width of the endless track.

15. The skid frame assembly of claim 11, wherein the shock absorber is offset from the centerline of the skid frame assembly.

16. A snow vehicle comprising:

a chassis and an engine attached to the chassis;

a seat supported by the chassis;

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a skid frame assembly, including:
 a longitudinal skid rail positioned along a centerline of the skid frame assembly;
 one or more idler wheels coupled to the longitudinal skid rail; and
 a suspension system, the suspension system coupled to at least one of the skid rail and one or more idler wheels; and
 an endless track encircling the longitudinal skid rail; wherein at least a portion of the skid rail is hollow, and wherein the suspension system includes at least one shock absorber positioned inside a width of the endless track, wherein the shock absorber is offset from the centerline of the skid frame assembly.

17. The snow vehicle of claim 16 wherein the skid frame assembly further comprises a rear suspension arm, the rear suspension having an upper horizontal member, the upper

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horizontal member having a first width, measured along the length of the upper horizontal member, and the skid rail having a second width, the first width being greater than the second width.

5 18. The snow vehicle of claim 17, wherein the rear suspension arm further comprises a lower horizontal member, the lower horizontal member having a third width, measured along the length of the lower horizontal member, wherein the third width is greater than the second width.

10 19. The skid frame assembly of claim 16, wherein the endless track is positioned over the centerline of the skid frame assembly and includes at least one slide surface in contact with a wear strip secured to a lower surface of the longitudinal skid rail, wherein the endless track includes first and second portions extending unsupported on either side of the slide surface.

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