

Western Alaska Highway is Needed

Rep. Mike Kelly, Community Perspective / Fairbanks Daily News-Miner

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A new highway traversing the beautiful and resource-rich land between Interior and Western Alaska has been dreamed by Alaskans for half a century. The time to build it is now. The Legislature should set aside the dollars necessary to fund this project while oil prices are high and trans-Alaska oil pipeline throughput is 20 percent higher than it will be in five years.

Early this year, I visited with the Department of Transportation about making a top priority of constructing the project connecting Western Alaska to the Dalton, Parks, Richardson-Alaska, Glenn and Seward highway system. In June, I was pleased to learn that DOT had funded a study that would pull together all previous publications and data relating to transportation, resources and land ownership along the corridor. The study will evaluate the costs and benefits of alternative routes, including maintenance and operations, and will recommend future action. This study by DOT tells me the department under Gov. Sarah Palin and commissioner Leo Von Scheben is seriously considering planning for construction of this important state infrastructure. It is also encouraging that the Institute of the North has the road to Nome in its sights and that the Legislature is focused on investing our resource wealth in energy and infrastructure.

Tie-in of Western Alaska to the Alaska-Canada National Highway system is a perfectly legitimate government responsibility anticipated by architects of our statehood act. Some may mourn the opportunities we've missed or regret corrosive societal impacts spawned by the feds locking up much of Alaska and throwing away the keys, but that only generates bitterness, kills horsepower and wastes time. If we begin an expedited road construction process immediately, we will generate private development, job creation and training opportunities that will complement gas line construction, diversify and minimize overheating of our economy, and avoid labor shortages associated with simultaneous construction. But far more elegant, we will re-ignite hope.

We are without a gas pipeline from the North Slope to market, despite 30 years of effort. I'm OK with that — glad we didn't sell our gas at 75 cents per thermal unit beginning in 1975 or \$1.50 per thermal unit in 1995. However, now is the right

time for a 48-inch line to market. Although I have some critical concerns that need answers, I also support seeking early gas through a small-diameter bullet/spur line.

But while we prepare for actual construction of the 48-inch gas pipeline to begin, let's build the road connecting Western Alaska to our road system in addition to repairing/upgrading the existing transportation infrastructure from Haines to Deadhorse. Many Alaska villages are in decline. Unemployment in some communities along the Western access corridor exceeds 50 percent. Suicide and abuse rates far exceed national averages, and our jails are bursting at the seams. In many communities, hope and joy seem to have given up and moved on. I believe the state providing this life-giving infrastructure is precisely what federal and state leaders intended when they gave Alaska title to its natural resources. They knew there would be too few people in our cold and vast land to bear the tax burden required to support the infrastructure needed to thrive. I'm convinced that jobs, well being and wealth will begin to flow up and down its centerline at an astounding rate, permitting locals to thrive and Alaska cities and towns to prosper.

The 1,500-mile Alaska Highway was built in eight months and still serves us well. Our ability to handle technical challenges of sub-arctic construction is well honed. Our project environmental and fish and wildlife record is world class. I'm confident rural and urban communities, along with mining, energy, tourism and transportation industries can be brought together to support the road to Western Alaska. It is time to make the road to Western Alaska one of the top pre-gasline construction priorities for our governor and the Legislature.

Here's what I see:

- In 2010, standing on the west bank of the Nenana River, I can look across at the Healy Clean Coal Plant and hear the coal-steam turbine spinning out 400 million low-cost kilowatt hours to supply Interior Alaska homes and businesses.
- In 2014, I see the new Nome road departing Interior Alaska as it stretches 500 miles to our neighbors in Western Alaska.
- In 2020, I can look south to the Susitna River Hydroelectric project silently and cleanly pumping more than 1,000 megawatts of zero-fuel-cost power into the Railbelt power grid to light and power our homes and businesses.

What do you see?

EPA study found that Red Dog Mine benefited region

COMPASS: Other points of view

By MARIE GREENE

(02/07/09 18:32:59)

NANA would like to offer a different view regarding the recent EPA study on Red Dog Mine than the Jan. 29 Daily News presented. The headline, which focused on subsistence harvests, missed the real news in the study.

EPA found that operating Red Dog for an additional twenty years will have a substantial positive effect on public health and well-being in our NANA region, as the quality of education and schools, community infrastructure and services supported by Red Dog continues. Red Dog Mine makes a positive contribution to the entire state. The environmental study reports Red Dog's total 2007 Alaska spending at \$321 million, including \$109 million paid in taxes to the state of Alaska. Furthermore, Red Dog created 543 direct jobs in 2007 with a payroll of \$46 million.

This was accomplished while still, according to EPA's study, protecting downstream drinking water and providing for a healthy fish population. Now that's news!

The study did report reduced beluga and caribou harvests by nearby villagers. This data came from subsistence surveys conducted in 2008 in Kivalina and Noatak. This traditional knowledge is important and must be considered when reviewing any potential project in rural Alaska. However, EPA fails to distinguish between causation and correlation. It just assumes that changes to subsistence harvests occurring over the last 20 years are caused by Red Dog Mine. There is much more to the story.

For example, according to Jim Magdanz, a state subsistence resource specialist in Kotzebue, the 2007 Fish and Game survey showed that the overall subsistence harvest has remained consistent in Kivalina from 1967 to 2007. The per capita harvest in Kivalina for all subsistence foods is comparable to (and often exceeds) other villages within the NANA region. The per capita harvest has decreased primarily because the population has grown and the eating habits have changed with the introduction of non-native foods.

Red Dog respects regional subsistence priorities and, with NANA, formed a subsistence committee to help guide mine operations. With representatives from Noatak and Kivalina, the eight member committee meets quarterly to further the protection of the subsistence resource.

With subsistence counsel guidance, Red Dog has implemented strict policies that govern the operation of vehicles on the road. Closure of the road for several hours to several days for the caribou migration is a common occurrence and is considered part of the normal operation of the state-owned road. A majority of the truck drivers are NANA shareholders as well. They understand how important caribou are because many of these same drivers harvest them for their subsistence food as well.

Belugas have always been an important and cherished food source for our people. In recognition of the importance of beluga, Kivalina subsistence committee members

advise when the spring hunt is over. Barge loading cannot start until the subsistence committee gives its OK.

The Inupiat of our region are blessed to live where there is a wonderful variety of traditional foods. We rely on the bearded seal, walrus, beluga, bowhead whale, fish, waterfowl, berries and greens. All scientific studies indicate it is safe to continue to harvest these foods.

As a child in Deering, I was raised on the bounty of the land. But things are changing throughout rural Alaska. My generation and those after mine are consuming larger quantities of processed and store-bought food. This decline in subsistence food consumption and corollary increase in non-Western food consumption is well documented in rural Alaska and results in increased instances of diabetes, high blood pressure and other health issues. These are serious issues and they must be addressed. However, it is not appropriate to suggest the decline in subsistence harvest and consumption is due to the Red Dog Mine.

At NANA we open ourselves to discussions about Red Dog Mine, about our region and about our people. It is part of our culture to make decisions with the input of, and to the benefit of, the group. We will continue to improve the communication and cooperation between the subsistence committee and the residents of the NANA region.

Marie Greene is president and CEO of NANA Regional Corporation.

Palin pushes for road to Nome

PIPE DREAM? Project would cost \$3 million to \$4 million a mile.

By SEAN COCKERHAM
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(01/31/09 23:03:07)

JUNEAU -- Boomers talked for decades about building a road to Nome, an epic 500-mile plus project that would run through some of the most remote wilderness of forest, tundra, rivers and valleys in the world. Now Gov. Sarah Palin, to the dismay of some state legislators, is making a push for what could be a \$2 billion project.

Palin highlighted the project in her State of the State speech 10 days ago, declaring that she's pursuing a road to Nome, while in the same speech acknowledging a potential budget shortfall of more than a billion dollars. Some lawmakers are scratching their heads.

"I would say that with the limited amount of funds we have for projects I don't know how high that would rank," said Bethel Democratic Sen. Lyman Hoffman, a budget leader in the state Senate. "And if we did construct the road, what are the benefits Alaska would get for such a large-ticket item?"

Palin's transportation commissioner, Leo Von Scheben, gets a gleam in his eye when that question is posed.

"Look at the map of Alaska, and what do you see in terms of roads? North and south, north and south," he said. "We've got nothing going west. And look at what we've got out there. All kinds of resources."

He said the cost of the road would be about \$3 million or \$4 million a mile.

The state has a \$1 million contract for consultants to compile all the previous studies of the road to Nome.

Von Scheben said they are looking at the route. "It would probably start north of Fairbanks and then head west," he said.

The road could branch off the Dalton Highway, Von Scheben said, maybe just north of the Yukon River bridge, then cross the Interior to the Bering Sea coast at Nome.

The state's study of the route should be done in September, the transportation commissioner said. The Palin administration could then come to the Legislature for design money, a look at soils, etc. "Maybe \$5-10 million to kick it into another gear," Von Scheben said.

The road to Nome is part of increasingly aggressive talk by the governor about state funding for big ideas, reminiscent of the grand ideas of former Govs. Wally Hickel and Frank Murkowski. Palin is also pushing preliminary work on a road to Umiat on the North Slope -- another \$4 million-a-mile project. Oil companies are exploring the

natural gas development potential in the area, about 110 miles southwest Prudhoe Bay.

The governor's office is looking at pursuing multibillion-dollar dam projects as well. This comes as the drop in state oil prices have left the state with a shortfall this year and what could be a \$2 billion to \$3 billion deficit next year.

The road to Nome and the dam projects wouldn't qualify for the federal economic-stimulus money, because those dollars are for projects that have been designed, permitted, and ready to start construction right away. So it's on the state to spend money to get them going.

But legislators like Fairbanks Republican Rep. Mike Kelly, who supports the road to Nome, argue the drop in oil prices shouldn't stop the state from pursuing big projects.

It's about a multi-generational benefit for the state, he said, and the road to Nome should have been built 10 years ago.

Power lines could follow the road construction, he said, with the project opening up Western Alaska for development of mineral and other resources. There would be a boost in tourism, more jobs for a poor area, he said.

"I think it brings hope to Western Alaska," Kelly said. "There are some folks out there who are out of hope."

It is not clear exactly how much resource potential exists along a route from the Interior to Nome, said Jeanine Schmidt, a research geologist with the U.S. Geological Survey. She said there are some small sedimentary basins that might have oil and gas potential, as well as many gold, copper and uranium prospects.

It's impossible to say how good the prospects are because there isn't much activity out there with the lack of access, she said. Schmidt said a road to Nome would face a lot of land ownership challenges, with wildlife refuges and other federal lands along the way.

Some legislators wonder if Palin is actually serious about a road to Nome. The previous governor, Frank Murkowski, often talked about "Roads to Resources," the most ambitious of which never seemed to get off the ground.

"Is it an actual idea or a vision to develop?" said Chugiak Republican Rep. Bill Stoltze, who is the prime architect of spending on construction projects in the state House.

People in Nome aren't ready to start gassing up for the long drive to Fairbanks. Nome Mayor Denise Michaels said she was surprised to hear the governor bring it up in her State of the State speech.

But Michaels said she appreciates the governor's focus on the road. It would open up access to Western Alaska, helping the economy of the area, she said.

She said it's a huge investment and she's not sure it's going to happen anytime soon, but figured maybe construction could start on both ends and go in phases.

Michaels said some people in Western Alaska villages are concerned about what such a road would mean for their communities, worrying about bootlegging and an interruption of subsistence activities.

Most want to be part of the planning, Michaels said, and she thinks the state understands that.

Nome city councilman Stan Anderson said there's been talk about the road for the past 50 or 60 years. He's not holding his breath.

"Until the money is actually there it's kind of like a pie in the sky type of thing," he said.

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Governor Palin has the right idea

Posted on 04 February 2009



By Dan Fagan

One of the big reasons it is close to impossible to create wealth for yourself and your family in bush Alaska is the lack of infrastructure. When you can't drive somewhere, it's hard for an economy to develop.

Governor Sarah Palin is on the right track in proposing building a road to Nome. With all the billions of dollars the state has wasted through the years, it's a disgrace we haven't used that money to build roads and bridges in Alaska.

Grant it, building a road or a bridge isn't what it used to be. Former Governor Wally Hickel once said on my radio show, back in the day, if we needed a road we'd just build it. No more.

Take the Knik Arm Bridge for example. A recent poll shows the majority of people living in Anchorage believe building the Knik Arm Bridge to connect our city to an abundance of open developable land is a good idea. Of course it's a good idea. It's more like a no brainer.

The ridiculous cost of housing is one of the real downsides of living in Anchorage. Liberals complain all the time about the growing homeless problem in Anchorage because housing is so expensive. Yet liberals offer the greatest resistance to building the Knik Arm Bridge. A bridge that would lead to the development of new homes, which would most certainly drive down the cost of housing in Anchorage.

Liberals also complain about the state not doing enough to fight poverty in bush Alaska. Their answer is to throw more free cash at people living in a region with little hope of new jobs.

The real answer is to build roads to bush Alaska. Let me ask you a question. When's the last time a liberal favored building a road?

Governor Palin has the right idea with her plan to build a road to Nome.

Of course liberals controlling the media will fight the idea all the way. Look how the Daily News reports on the plan. They call it an epic 500-mile plus project that would run through some of the most remote wilderness of forest, tundra, rivers and valleys in the world.

What kind of terrain do you think all the roads in Alaska ran through when first built? That's what roads do, they run through remote wilderness of forest, tundra, rivers and valleys. The anti development ADN reports, "Gov. Sarah Palin, to the dismay of some state legislators, is making a push for what could be a \$2 billion project. They make it sound as though this project is the equivalency of going to the moon."

The Daily News opinion page on Wednesday echoed their newsroom's criticism of the road to Nome writing,

"At \$3 million to \$4 million a mile, just how would we pay for this 500-mile project? It would consume upwards of \$2 billion -- money that can't be spent on better schools, better police protection, a stronger university, better maintenance of the roads we already have. And for what gain? Where is the \$2 billion of benefit to Alaskans?"

The state gave away almost \$1 billion in free cash last year because we felt sorry for people. What's \$2 billion for a project that could transform the economy of half the state?

It's not like we would have to pay for the road to Nome in one lump sum. It would take years to build. We could pay for it as we go. The Palin administration says it would only take about \$15 million to get the project kick started.

Some lawmakers, mostly Democrats are skeptical.

"I would say that with the limited amount of funds we have for projects I don't know how high that would rank," Bethel Democratic Sen. Lyman Hoffman told the Anchorage Daily News. "And if we did construct the road, what are the benefits Alaska would get for such a large-ticket item?"

How about jobs Sen. Hoffman? How about an opportunity to raise your family in an area connected to the road system meaning an economic future for your kids? Of course with Hoffman being a Democrat, he'll have a more difficult time getting re-elected if his free stuff no longer represents the best way to survive in the bush.

One of the consistencies with liberals is they most often hurt those they try to help. By blocking the building of the Knik Arm Bridge they hurt the Anchorage homeless. And by fighting the building of roads, they deprive those in rural Alaska the right to create wealth for themselves.