

## **Knik Arm Crossing Will benefit Entire State**

The Alaska Legislature is about to decide the future course of the state's two fastest -growing communities, Anchorage and the Mat-Su Valley. Lawmakers will decide on partially funding the proposed Knik Arm Crossing, a bridge that will do far more than just physically connect the two communities, it will benefit the entire state.

The decision fell in the Legislature's lap due to intense media coverage triggered by a nationwide uproar over Alaska's bridge earmarks in the federal transportation bill. Congress bowed to public pressure last year, removed the earmarks and handed the decision over to the administration and lawmakers.

Last month, Governor Frank Murkowski proposed spending \$93 million dollars on the Knik Arm Crossing, \$136 million dollars less than what Congress allocated.

Federal transportation funding and the Statewide Transportation Improvement Plan, or STIP, Alaska's list of transportation projects eligible for federal funding, can be confusing and complicated for the layman to understand.

It is becoming clear to me that some of the bridge opponents are taking advantage of that fact to spread misinformation about how it will affect other transportation projects.

Environmental and anti-development groups are coming together in the Capitol building because they see a golden opportunity to sink the bridge before any dirt is moved.

Many communities are legitimately worried because they don't want the Knik Arm Crossing eating up a piece of the federal funding pie when they have needs in their communities. Congress, however, only yanked earmarks for the Knik and Gravina Island bridges.

There are still 120 earmarks, worth \$585 million, that have already delayed other road and trail projects, even if the Legislature doesn't appropriate a cent to the Knik Arm Crossing.

The Murkowski administration's plan for allocating the federal money actually frees up additional federal dollars because it diverts 52% of the original federal earmark away from the bridges to other transportation projects on the STIP.

Anti development groups are saying the \$93 million appropriation in the Murkowski administration budget for the Knik Arm Crossing is not nearly enough to pay for the \$600 million dollar project, and they are absolutely right.

What they're leaving out is the fact that the administration's proposal and the original federal earmark were never intended to pay for the entire project. The Knik Arm Bridge and Toll Authority's development plan splits construction costs between the federal government, the state and drivers who pay a toll for using the bridge.

The point I am trying to make is that our state's inability to make federal transportation funding pay for the infrastructure we need is really just a symptom of a very serious problem.

Unlike other states, Alaska counts on federal funding to pay for almost all its major transportation needs. In fact, the highway trust fund, upon which we count for federal-aid highway dollars, is in trouble.

As the price of fuel increases, usage decreases. You can do the math. Federal-aid funding will decrease overall. In the Lower-48, state governments, cities and counties all work together to help pay for many of the road and trail improvements out of their own pockets, and the payoff is better transportation corridors that get the traffic moving and invigorate the economy.

Alaska is never going to get its hands on enough federal dollars to pay for all its transportation needs. As a state we need to come to agreement on how we are going to meet a larger portion of our needs with local and state funding.

The Knik Arm Crossing is anything but a "bridge to nowhere." The benefits just can't be overstated. Tying the two regions together will open up thousands of acres of raw land to new industry, homes, schools and tremendous recreational opportunities that will help the entire state.

I am urging all Alaskans, regardless of where they live, to contact their legislators and express their support for the Knik Arm Crossing.

*Senator Charlie Huggins represents District H in the Alaska Senate.*