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# Nome road could cost \$2.7 billion

### STICKER SHOCK: Legislators cringe at \$5.4 million price per mile but see benefits of an Interior highway.

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JUNEAU -- A new state-funded study says a 500-mile road to Nome championed by Gov. Sean Parnell could cost nearly \$3 billion to build.

The price tag staggered some legislators Tuesday, but others want to push ahead in approving planning money Parnell is asking for. Parnell highlighted the project in his State of the State speech last week.

"The governor is very interested in this project. The road would create jobs for Alaskans and open access to resource development," Parnell's spokeswoman, Sharon Leighow, said Tuesday after the study came out.

The study was paid for by a \$1 million appropriation from the Legislature, and the idea of a road to Nome was pushed a year ago by then-Gov. Sarah Palin.

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Majority Leader Johnny Ellis said Tuesday when a reporter told him the construction cost estimate.

Advocates have described the road as opening up the country for mining opportunities. Ellis said he'd be interested in seeing the private sector kick in. "And it depends on how much the state is getting back in terms of state revenue, because mining doesn't really pay very much into the state treasury," said Ellis, a Democrat from Anchorage.

Legislators from Nome and Fairbanks are pushing hard for the project.

Nome Democratic Sen. Donny Olson has said the road would bring in much cheaper gasoline and heating oil to Western Alaska. Fairbanks Republican Rep. Mike Kelly said the state should start now on construction, and eventually expand the road to Kotzebue and Dillingham. It would create jobs and bring hope to the region, he argued, helping with problems like domestic abuse and suicide.

Parnell is asking the Legislature to appropriate \$2 million in the coming year for more route analysis and engineering. His spokeswoman said the idea is to build the road in phases, going from one "resource deposit" to the next and providing for cheaper supplies for villages along the way. She said it's too soon to say how the actual construction would be financed, and if private money might be involved.

The route recommended by the Dowl engineers would begin as a branch off the Elliott Highway near Manley Hot Springs, which is about 160 miles from Fairbanks. The road would then roughly

id the work and recommended the road begin near through Interior villages west to Norton Sound.

led route would run \$2.3 billion to \$2.7 billion (or ince and resurfacing costs would run another \$40

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parallel the Yukon River, running near villages including Tanana, Ruby, Nulato and Koyuk before veering off from the Yukon toward Nome. Plans include access roads to the villages.

The road would pass through an estimated 65 miles of mountains, 185 miles of wetlands and require the construction of a new Yukon River crossing. The Dowl engineering study said the general area has great potential for gold, silver and other minerals, although the data on that is limited because it's so remote there's been little exploration.

The road would run through Interior villages represented in the Legislature by Chalkytsik Democratic Rep. Woodie Salmon. He said Tuesday that whether he supports the road or not would depend on the exact route, but at this point he's inclined to favor the project because it would bring fuel costs down and make it easier to get supplies in.

But there are downsides. "There would be land squabbles and everything else that would be associated with the influx of people," he said.

Alaskans have been talking for decades about building a road to Nome. Whether it could actually happen or is just a fantasy like so many giant Alaska dream projects depends which legislator is speaking.

"I don't think we're going to be able to find the money. Do you?" said Anchorage Democratic Rep. Mike Doogan, after hearing the \$2.7 billion figure.

Sitka Republican Sen. Bert Stedman said the road to Nome is a possibility. He said he also wants to look at the potential of extending the Alaska Railroad to the Brooks Range, maybe even Prudhoe Bay. Stedman, who helps write the state budget as co-chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, said the state hasn't built such a big project in decades.

"To me that's unacceptable. To have generations of designers, planners and builders that don't design, plan and build infrastructure to advance the state," he said.

Read more of Sean Cockerham's dispatches from Juneau on our Alaska Politics blog at [adn.com/alaskapolitics](http://adn.com/alaskapolitics).

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