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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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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.

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Rep. Mike Kelly

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," he said. "We've got nothing going on at we've got out there. All kinds of resources."

The road would be about \$3 million or \$4 million a

million contract for consultants to compile all the details for the road to Nome.

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Leo von Scheben

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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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