

Public hearings put road to Nome back in the headlights

\$3 BILLION COST: Route from Interior stirs debate over pros, cons of access.

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How's this sound?

You drive to Manley Hot Springs and turn left, bumping along the new gravel-topped highway at 40 mph. Maybe you see some caribou. Somewhere off in the distance, through the passenger-side window, is the Yukon River.

By nighttime, you're in Nome.

That's the idea behind a proposed highway from the Interior to Western Alaska being studied by the state Department of Transportation and pursued by Gov. Sean Parnell. It'd cost nearly \$3 billion, and Alaskans who live along the proposed route have no shortage of opinions about whether it'd make life better or worse in their hometowns.

Public money would be better spent on education and health care or subsidizing fuel and airfare costs in rural Alaska, Carolyn Schubert told the crowd at a public hearing on the road proposal Thursday night in Anchorage.

She carried her notes alongside a green water bottle with a sticker that read "I'm Yup'ik" to the meeting of 40 to 50 people. Schubert called on the audience to fight the proposed road.

John Dickens, who described himself as a safety officer for a small airline, disagreed.

"We are in desperate times," said Dickens, who says he has a home in Bethel with his wife. It's just a matter of time before Alaska loses the federal mail subsidies that keep the cost of food and services in remote villages from rising even higher, he said.

Without less expensive, year-round transportation, people one day will have to abandon their villages, he said.

The debate in Anchorage echoes comments heard at a series of roughly 30 meetings in hub cities and -- more often -- villages that flank the proposed route.

BUILD IN PHASES

About \$2 million has been spent researching the road -- including a 2010 report that recommended a route that parallels the Yukon River as it heads west. Parnell considers the project a priority, a spokeswoman said, and has asked the Legislature to spend another \$1.25 million to determine more precisely where the road would go, among other preliminary work.

"The plan is to have the road built in phases, going from one resource deposit to the next," Leighow said. "Communities along the road will benefit from the lower fuel and supply costs that

will result from surface transportation."

Lois Epstein, an engineer and longtime transportation watchdog, said the proposal is the most expensive road project before the state. Telling people that it would be built in their lifetimes is misleading, she said, and that there's no financial plan in place to pay the \$2.7 billion bill.

"We have to think long and hard about funding this project," she said.

Theresa Szafran told the crowd she was raised in Nome and Council and that rural Alaskans are not as isolated as they once were.

Almost everyone has an Internet connection, she said. "So why not be physically connected as well?"

PEOPLE DIVIDED

The notion of a road to Nome has long been proposed, debated and studied in Alaska.

Studies and maps of old road routes date to the 1800s, said Tom Middendorf, a member of Dowl HKM, the Anchorage engineering firm hired to research possible routes.

The project is still just an idea that the state is studying. It'd take years before construction begins, and at least five more years to build the first section, according to notes from the many public hearings on the Department of Transportation website.

And that's if someone is willing to pay for it.

The road would cost as much as \$5.4 million per mile, Dowl estimated in a January 2010 report.

The price tag does not include another \$40 million a year in maintenance and resurfacing costs -- or the cost of building spur roads to villages along the way.

There are no clear answers to the funding puzzle yet, said state Rep. Neal Foster, D-Nome. Do you try a toll road? Do you tax the private industries that use it?

Some people in his district like the road idea, he said.

"Maybe it brings the cost of transportation for goods down, and they're excited about the jobs that it brings. Not only for construction but for the maintenance of the road," Foster said.

"On the other hand you have folks who would like to continue the small-town feel that the communities along the various proposed routes would have," he said.

Among the concerns expressed at the public hearings: The road could give hunters from outside the region easy access to the area to compete for fish and game.

The road is pitched as a way to unlock mining deposits in a roadless swath of Alaska. Some villagers have criticized the project, saying it benefits mining companies, not people who live in the region. Middendorf noted Thursday in Anchorage that the firm is recommending a route that steers closer to villages and farther from potential mines than one of the other paths under consideration.

SEPARATE MINING ROAD

The road to Nome is sometimes confused with a different potential road to the north that could provide access to the Ambler mining district. The state Department of Transportation is studying that idea, too.

One route for that project could head west from the Dalton Highway. Or the road could start in the mining district and go west to a port along the coast, said Ryan Anderson, a project manager for the Transportation Department.

A report on the project, including estimated costs, is expected in April, he said.

Unlike the road to Nome, which could link cash-poor villages to the rest of the state, the Ambler road is aimed directly at resource development.

The region's rich zinc and copper deposits could yield profitable mines and create hundreds of jobs in the Ambler, Shungnak and Kobuk region if they were connected to a road, said Rick Van Nieuwenhuysse, chief executive for British Columbia-based NovaGold Resources Inc.

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