

[Close this window](#)[Print this page](#)

## A road to Russia, via Nome

### International effort needed to succeed

Bob Thomas, Community Perspective

Published Sunday, May 17, 2009

I applaud Gov. Palin's plan to revive the vision to build a road to Nome. During the 1970s, the Interior region completed a comprehensive study and environmental analysis on this project. It never saw the light of day. Unfortunately, the initial dubious economics of building a road that only serves Nome and communities along the way was, and will always be, fraught with political controversy.

But parochial politics can be mostly avoided by making the road to Nome an integral link of a larger and inevitable project — the TransWorld Highway. Happily, the TransWorld Highway comes with an economic engine and an international consortium to foot construction costs.

Now is the time for Alaska to take international leadership and extend the proposed road to Nome to connect with the rest of the world. A highway link that creates the TransWorld Highway would require approximately 1,700 miles of road — about 300 miles in Alaska and 1,400 miles through Russia. When completed, one could drive to practically anywhere else on Earth, including Ireland and Australia. (The United States built the Alaska Highway in eight months nearly 70 years ago during wartime — it also was 1,700 miles long.)

The timing for this project could not be more favorable. It would be popular with the international community and could no doubt be financed and built by the World Bank. It would be of national importance to our country. And most important — Alaska can, and ought to be, the catalyst to make it happen. The economic spinoffs for our state are far too great to wait for another entity to take the lead. Ultimately, the economical spinoffs from this trade route would outstrip Alaska's oil revenue — especially as oil fields decline and politics delay or even prevent more exploitation. Even better, revenues accompanying the TransWorld Highway would fall into the laps of the private sector, in contrast to oil revenues, which flow directly to government coffers.

Crossing the Bering Strait presents a challenge — or so it would seem. But the strait is similar to the English Channel, which was exclusively served by ferries for more than 100 years. Even railroads maintained ferry traffic across the channel.

Today's technology can build ice-breaking ferries that could ply the Bering Strait in most, if not all, seasons. Such a ferry would well serve the TransWorld Highway for decades to come. But ultimately, a railroad tunnel will be built. Thus, it is important that highway alignment and grade be built to accommodate a future railroad — because a highway will foster the overland commerce that will make a railroad viable. What is in it for our state? These are the more obvious reasons:

- Alaska would be on the most enviable world trade route since China's Silk Road was built more than 2,000 years ago. All communities along that route prospered. The same will be true for Alaska (and Canada) communities along the TransWorld Highway. • By getting the World Bank to build the TransWorld Highway, we would connect Alaska's west coast and the world with our contiguous road network.
- The controversy of an in-state highway would turn into all-out support as the project takes on national and international interest. • Capital costs would be borne by others, namely the World Bank and member countries.
- The economic benefits from construction accruing to Alaska would be substantial and spread statewide; but especially strong in western Alaska, where the ferry port would be constructed.

Both China and Russia have a keen interest in this project. And all member countries of the World Bank are seeking mega-projects to encourage economic recovery — and to put their engineers and contractors to work. As incredible as it might seem, I am persuaded that, given the world's dire economic situation and with our governor's leadership, this project could be “shovel ready” in 12 to 18 months. It could be completed in five years by starting construction in several locations.

We have a timely window of opportunity to act. If we fail to do so, then decades from now Alaska will still be muddling about, trying to get a road built to Nome.

I am equally convinced that we can cash in on this unique opportunity, get the international community on board and get it done now — rather than wait 30 to 50 years for another opportunity like this one. It's something to get excited about.