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Road to Nome idea gathers support from Interior Alaska villages

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*** To download a larger version of the proposed road to Nome map, click [here](#).**

FAIRBANKS — A road to Nome has been eyed by government agencies before automatic stoplights and asphalt were invented. Calls for a ground route to the Seward Peninsula city predate America's first gas station and E.T. Barnette's trading post on the banks of the Chena River.

But it still takes a plane or one heck of an off-road trip to get there.

A road to the 3,500-person Bering Sea town is back on the state's to-do list, and the latest incarnation has some newfound support among Interior tribal villages.

At its annual convention, the Tanana Chiefs Conference board of directors approved a resolution to support the road project that it adamantly opposed a decade ago.

"At one time, there was a no-nonsense, no-roads-in-our-yards position," TCC President Jerry Isaac said about tribal opinions from 10 to 15 years ago.

Tough economic times and skyrocketing fuel costs changed that position, he said.

"It costs a great deal of money to send 250 pounds of goods from Fred Meyer," said Isaac, who is from Tanacross, a road-accessible village off the Alaska Highway near Tok. "The transportation costs make everything more expensive around the community. A road system would alleviate that somewhat."

But village support is just a small piece of a project that has been proposed time and time again. It was even designated as U.S. Highway 97's western extension in the 1950s.

Research by Nome utilities manager John Handeland and city controller Cussy Kauer revealed documents dating back to a 1900 U.S. Geological Survey preliminary report identifying a need for rail or road transportation to the Cape Nome Gold Region.

It was most recently revitalized when then-Gov. Sarah Palin pursued it in 2009, and current Gov. Sean Parnell has continued the effort.

A January planning report by the engineering firm DOWL HKM stated the best route would connect the Elliott Highway near Manley Hot Springs to the end of

the Nome-Council Highway.

The price tag could range from \$2.3 billion to \$2.7 billion, the report stated.

The Department of Transportation spent \$1 million to study possible corridors to Nome, and Gov. Parnell's proposed capital budget includes another \$1 million for 2010.

No definite source of funding for the entire project has yet been identified, Sharon Leighow, the governor's press secretary, stated in an e-mail to the News-Miner.

The road is planned to be built in phases, from one resource-rich area to the next, and the state is still considering three routes.

DOWL HKM's suggested 500-mile road would go through Tanana. The TCC board of directors also endorsed a highway to Tanana.

At its annual conference March 18, its board of directors voted to support the road's construction. TCC is a consortium of 42 Interior tribal communities. Villages on the Seward Peninsula, including Nome, are not TCC communities and did not vote.

The resolution lists improved access to villages, cheaper supplies and job creation as benefits of the road.

Ruby transportation and planning technician Elizabeth Captain echoed that statement, saying Ruby's tribal government is "all for it."

"It's going to bring everything here," she said. "It's going to bring the cost of fuel down."

The engineers' report estimated savings for transportation costs to six villages within 20 miles of the route if extension roads were created. Four were TCC communities: Tanana, Ruby, Galena and Koyukuk.

A road would cut the annual cost of transporting fuel, cargo and mail by about \$491,000 to Tanana, \$618,000 to Ruby, \$1,896,000 to Galena and \$258,000 to Koyukuk, according to the report.

Isaac wouldn't offer a personal opinion on the project because he said he is charged to follow the resolutions of its tribes.

Richard Burnham, a Kaltag resident who serves on a handful of councils and boards in the Middle Yukon region, sees those benefits but said there are more pressing matters the state should be addressing.

"Personally, I see some positives, but I see a lot of negatives at a time when we need to be focusing on other things in the state," he said.

Burnham said the state's top priority should be an improved energy policy, especially one that brings its natural gas resources to the local markets.

If the state were to build a road, he suggests constructing one that connects developers to promising mining claims, such as the long-proposed road from Ruby to McGrath.

"The state should be opening up places where the resources for development justify the costs of building the road," Burnham said.

David Maillelle, a tribal council member in the middle Yukon River village of Grayling, opposes the road because it will create easy access for hunters and fishers, taking from an already-thinning supply of wildlife.

"There will be too many people coming out here," he said.

But Burnham noted there are positives to building a road, especially because soaring fuel and shipping prices are hindering economic development in rural communities.

TCC will support the road by helping the state and engineering firms determine the project's feasibility, keep information flowing into and out of the villages and protecting the interest of its communities, Isaac said.

The proposed route runs near the Yukon River and must cross it at least once, so TCC will be monitoring the project's environmental consequences, he added.

"Yes, there will be noticeable impacts, but there will also be benefits," Isaac said.

Meadow Bailey, information officer for DOT's Northern Region, said TCC's endorsement is important to the project. The department dealt with the traditional nonprofit throughout the preliminary stages.

"We're very happy that TCC has stayed involved and educated," she said.

DOT plans to schedule meetings in villages that could be affected by the project, Bailey said. Three other routes have not been discarded as possibilities.

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