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With cost close to \$3 billion, road to Nome might stay out of reach

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FAIRBANKS - A road to Nome would cost about \$5.8 million per mile or more than \$1,000 per foot, a new state study says, when the road, bridge and maintenance station building costs are added.

No one in Alaska's state government is saying where the money would come from to build the first foot of a project that could cost close to \$3 billion, so the road remains an idea whose time might never come.

The proponents of the road to Nome always have envisioned something simpler than the plan outlined in the study, a 30-foot-wide road with eight inches of gravel on the surface above a 64-inch base. The gravel is estimated to cost \$1.5 million per mile.

Those who want the road built would say their preferred alternative is not to start with a first-class highway with plenty of passing room, but something more akin to the early Richardson Highway, which grew from a sled route to a wagon road that connected Point A to Point B. Throughout the decades, it was improved, straightened and leveled, a little bit at a time.

Had Gen. Wilds Richardson any idea a century ago how much might have to be spent on the road that would one day bear his name, he would have known it was impossible to build.

When the first Territorial Legislature convened in 1913, one of its actions was to ask the federal government to build some roads, but aside from the early trails, the first real burst of road-building in Alaska occurred during and after World War II.

The road to Nome, a dream championed by the Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce in the 1950s and 1960s, was even given a number, the western extension of U.S. Highway 97.

But the federal and state road planning machinery that has evolved throughout the last half-century has made trailblazing techniques a thing of the past. There were no rules to follow when the Richardson Highway was built. There also was only a handful of cars and no one expected to drive faster than a galloping horse.

The \$2.3 billion to \$2.7 billion plan for a road to Nome does not call for corduroy road construction or cutting a narrow path through the trees.

Some proponents of the road would like to go back to the old ways, as that would lower the upfront costs and make this seem affordable, but the legal, environmental, safety and administrative rules make that impossible.

If the road is not planned to meet certain standards, the federal government wouldn't provide any money. If by some chance a pioneer road would be built, the complaints about its sorry condition would start before the first accident.

The state spent \$1 million on this latest planning effort, and the governor wants to spend another million to continue planning. Gov. Sean Parnell mentioned the road in his State of the State speech last week, just as Gov. Sarah Palin did a year ago.

But no matter how much gets spent on planning, the state is not about to build this road with its own money, given the range of competing interests clamoring for the same dollars.

The new study states that the best route would begin just outside Manley Hot Springs off the Elliott Highway and end at the Nome-Council Highway.

It would require a new mile-long Yukon River bridge, for about \$111 million, and road construction through 165 miles of rolling terrain, 185 miles of wetlands and 65 miles of mountainous terrain, but it could be done in stages, the study states. Annual maintenance and renovation costs could be \$40 million.

Roads could be built off the main road to reach the Donlin Creek Mine and the Ambler mining district, the study states.

Providing better access to Tanana, Ruby, Galena, Koyukuk, Koyuk and Nome would save \$19 million per year, the study predicts, with about half of that coming in the form of reduced cargo prices and bypass mail charges. The impact on the air carriers that benefit from the bypass mail subsidies are not counted in those "savings."

The bulk of the savings would be in Nome, with a reduction of \$7.8 million in cargo costs and a \$7.1 million reduction in bypass mail.

For the six villages, the study pegs a "savings of \$3,900 per person per year if a road were available, although not all of the savings would accrue to the residents of the case study communities: Some savings would go to the United States Postal Service, for example."

Supplying potential mines would be much cheaper by road and make them more economic, creating jobs in the region, while the road also could allow villages to shift from barged diesel fuel to trucked propane as a fuel source, saving \$2,700 per person per year, the report states.

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BEST WISHES: The friends and relatives of Meg "Rita" Johnson, the inspirational matriarch of a distinguished Alaska family, plan to gather at 11:30 a.m. today at St. Raphael's Catholic Church to celebrate her 90th birthday. A pancake breakfast is planned.

She has been a dedicated volunteer for good causes and a generous soul who has made the

lives of all who know her much richer than they otherwise would have been. She will object to me saying this, but I have to do it: She is just great.

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