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# Alaska Gov. Walker fires DOT commissioner

*Nathaniel Herz*

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## Alaska Dispatch News

Alaska Gov. Bill Walker fired the state's acting transportation commissioner, Pat Kemp, on Monday, with the governor's spokeswoman attributing the decision to differences in the two men's priorities.

Kemp submitted a memorandum last week defending a controversial 50-mile road project linking Juneau to a new ferry terminal to Haines, writing that costs for existing ferries are a "perpetual drain on budgets." He also outlined potential penalties faced by the state if it suspended or canceled the Juneau road and the proposed bridge across Knik Arm, which have both received federal money.

Walker, who was sworn into office Dec. 1, [had requested a review of big state projects](#), including the bridge and the Juneau road, because of a looming \$3.5 billion budget deficit. Walker

said there was a need for decisive action to preserve the state's fiscal health.

"Commissioner Kemp had been told that the Juneau Access Project and the Knik Arm bridge were on the block," Walker's press secretary, Grace Jang, said in a phone interview. "And he publicly, in that memo, defended them -- and that shows that he's not aligned with the governor on his priorities."

Kemp's firing was first reported by the [Juneau Empire](#). In a phone interview Monday, Kemp said he had planned to retire at the end of November, but just before leaving he agreed to stay in his position at the Walker administration's request.

Kemp had already cleared out his office in anticipation of retirement, and he said he hadn't been sure how long he would keep his job. But Jang said that Walker had not been planning to keep Kemp permanently -- and that his departure was merely accelerated by the memorandum.

Kemp said he was asked by Walker's chief of staff for his resignation Monday morning, and that he had been treated "pretty square."

"They just said it's time to go," he said. "And I said fine."

Kemp described his memorandum on the projects, however, as an "analysis" without a political agenda. He also said he had expected an internal administration discussion in advance of its publication.

"I thought we were going to have a dialogue over that memo before they just released it to the public," Kemp said. "Then the next thing I know, it's out in the press."

Jang responded: "Everything that we've done so far, and will continue to do, is going to be shared with Alaskans."

Critics of the Juneau road and the Knik Arm bridge had disputed some of the assertions in Kemp's memorandum, with one road opponent saying the commissioner had "slandered" the state's ferry system and was too pessimistic about the risk for federal penalties.

"This report was just one example of the bias towards building new megaprojects that we've seen from the department, and from Commissioner Kemp's leadership," Emily Ferry, the transportation campaign coordinator for the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, said in a phone interview Monday. "I think that Commissioner Kemp's vision for the Department of Transportation did not match what Gov. Walker's vision is."

Sen. Dennis Egan, D-Juneau, the outgoing co-chairman of the Senate's transportation committee, said he understood why Walker had removed Kemp, who'd spent 34 years in the transportation department. But Egan nonetheless called Kemp a "darned good commissioner."

"I didn't agree with him all the time, but he was dedicated to his department," Egan said in a phone interview Monday evening, as he was watching the college football national championship game.

Egan called Kemp's memorandum "ill-advised." He said he thought Kemp should have consulted with the governor's office before the report was released publicly.

"I was hoping that he'd be able to work with the current

administration," said Egan.

Kemp will be replaced temporarily by deputy commissioner John Binder, with Walker planning to name a permanent commissioner by the end of January.

Kemp declined to speak at length about his personal views on the future for the department's two big projects, but he did offer one opinion on the Juneau road: finish the ongoing environmental review, scheduled for completion later this year.

Kemp said completing the process would save the state money in the long run.

Ferry, the road opponent, agreed that the environmental review should be completed, though she said that taking no action on the project or opting for an improved ferry system would make more sense than moving forward with the road.

Separately on Monday, the Walker administration released another memorandum on a big state project, this time on the proposed Susitna-Watana dam in Southcentral Alaska.

The memorandum, signed by the executive director of the Alaska Energy Authority, says it would cost another \$100 million to complete licensing with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. It also says the authority needs to use \$4.5 million in unspent funds to complete "essential tasks."

The [Associated Press](#) reported late Monday that regulators had agreed to suspend the dam's licensing schedule for 60 days while the state decides how or whether to proceed with the project.

## About this Author

### [Nathaniel Herz](#)

Nathaniel Herz covers politics and general assignments. He's currently in Juneau covering the Alaska Legislature. Sign up for his weekly email roundup on all things Legislature, [The Agenda](#).

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