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Alaskans deserve better than tone-deaf cheering | Editorials

8-10 minutes

When we talk about the proposed Knik Arm bridge project, one thing we don't hear a lot about is that, one way or another, the money to build that bridge will come from Alaskans.

This isn't a large federal earmark we're talking about where Alaskans' federal income tax dollars would be bolstered by a sea of contributions from more populous states.

Instead, Alaskans would shoulder the bills for this more than \$1.14 billion bridge either from the state's general fund or through the tolls paid to use it. As such, we should be positive this project makes economic sense before we agree to pay this billion-dollar tab. It's OK to dream big. But when we are risking public tax dollars, even big dreams must of necessity be rooted in reality.

In the wee hours of Friday morning, the Alaska House of Representatives voted overwhelming to expand to \$600,000 the amount of money the Knik Arm Bridge and Toll Authority could borrow. But another part of the legislation passed from the House to the Senate could be perceived as, if not a rebuke to the project, certainly a call for caution and deliberation.

That move came just days after the Legislature's Budget and Audit Committee released an audit of KABATA's traffic numbers in which the auditor declared the forecasted traffic — the bedrock for toll projections and, thus, income — inflated.

We were not surprised when KABATA defended its traffic numbers, saying there are significant factors leading to increased bridge traffic that the Legislature's audit doesn't include.

However valid, the legislative audit seemed to call into question the veracity of KABATA's work, and added to the fiscal uncertainty surrounding the project. A lack of trust in KABATA seems part of the reason legislators voted to essentially dissolve it and absorb its functions into the Alaska Housing Finance Corp.

The Senate could attempt to reverse that move, but that seems unlikely given the support exhibited during debate on the floor of the House for placing AHFC, and its chief Dan Fauske, at the helm.

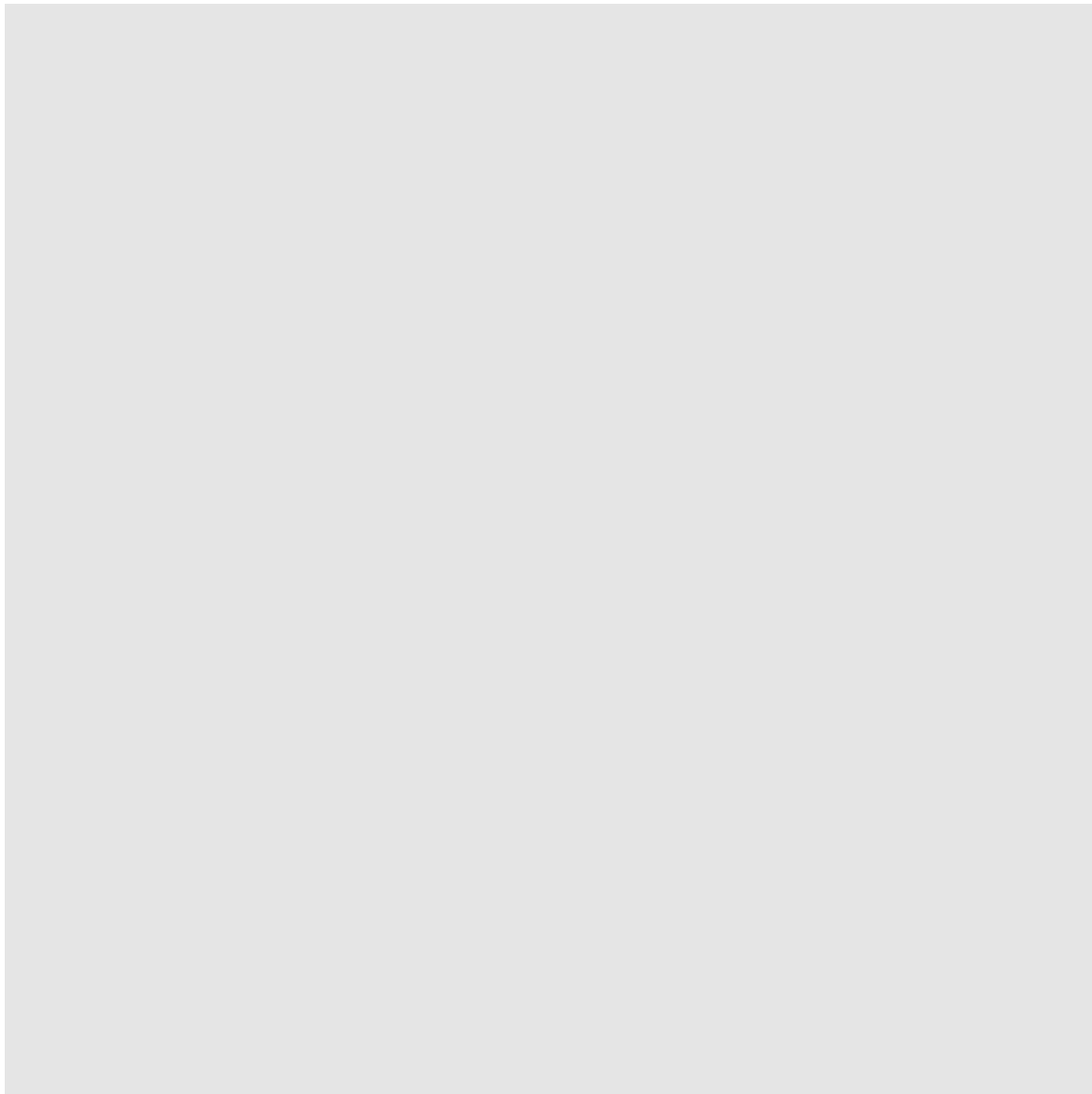
We're on the record as longtime critics of a Knik Arm bridge project as proposed by KABATA. We question the math behind this project and we do not support a project that funds a bridge but not necessary upgrades to the road system on the Mat-Su side where the bridge would dump traffic onto Knik-Goose Bay Road, or still worse, Burma Road.

Thus far, we've spent \$75 million on this bridge idea. We agree with Fauske that the project's traffic projections, funding questions and other areas of concern must be carefully vetted before billions more in tax dollars are risked.

To be clear, we know KABATA's role was never to vet this

project. It was created to build a Knik Arm bridge. As such, its role has always seemed to be more to cheer, than carefully evaluate, the project.

We welcome this shift to AHFC because we think Alaskans deserve more than tone-deaf cheering for projects that risk billions in public tax dollars, but may not make sense.



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I am definitely not used to getting up at 4 a.m.!





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