

frontiersman.com

Bridge to somewhere? | Local News Stories

*ANDREW WELLNER*Frontiersman

9-12 minutes

MAT-SU — With the federal highway administration essentially giving the Knik Arm Crossing a green light, it's not a stretch to wonder how prepared the Valley is for the traffic the bridge would bring.

The answer, it turns out, depends somewhat on how one defines "prepared."

State Rep. Mark Neuman, who represents Willow, Big Lake, Knik, and the area where the bridge will land, said that for work to begin in earnest upgrading the Valley's road system to handle Kink Arm Bridge traffic, the state had to wait on the Federal Highway Administration.

"The record of decision was needed before any other pieces of the puzzle could start being put together," Neuman said. "If this didn't move forward it would have just been a bunch of valuable time being spent on something that wasn't going to happen anyway. "

That record of decision came last week, heralded in a Dec. 15 press release from the Knik Arm Bridge and Toll Authority, the

organization heading up the effort to get the bridge built. The decision gives the project a green light, but also selects a route, in this case an 8,200-foot bridge with a tunnel under Erickson Street in Anchorage. KABATA said that with the record of decision in hand, it can begin the permitting process, start buying up rights of way, begin gathering financing for the project and, eventually, begin building it.

But while the state was in some ways waiting on that record of decision, Neuman said the state also had been setting aside money here and there. There was \$6.5 million for Burma Road and \$5 million for Port Mackenzie Road.

Neuman said he always thinks the state should proceed cautiously where the budget for construction projects is concerned.

“We put more money into our economy than we’ve got Alaskans to do the job, and that’s not a good thing either,” he said.

Over at the Mat-Su Borough, transportation planner Brad Sworts said there have been moves to look at both Burma Road and Knik-Goose Bay Road.

The state and the borough are working to buy up right of way for a potential expansion of Burma, a narrow, windy, steep road that travels from the Point MacKenzie area to South Big Lake Road.

Sworts said the eventual plan is to make a corridor funneling traffic from the bridge onto the Parks Highway using Burma and South Big Lake Roads.

But there’s also the question of Knik-Goose Bay Road, which connects to the Parks at quite possibly the Valley’s busiest

intersection. It has long been on the list of top five most dangerous in the state and as early as 2008 carried an estimated 10,000 to 16,000 passengers per day, according to the state's Department of Transportation and Public Facilities. Sworts said 10,000 is about the level where a road should be expanded from two to four lanes.

Asked which would see more of an increase in terms of traffic, Knik-Goose Bay or the Burma/Big Lake corridor, Neuman said he really didn't know.

"That would be any land developer's \$64 million question," he said.

But given that the road is already dangerous and at, or over, capacity, he said it should be the state's priority in the area.

Sworts said he knows the state Department of Transportation has already started looking at it, doing reconnaissance-type work to figure out where traffic signals and turn pockets and things like that should go. In addition to being a state legislator, Neuman is also a non-voting member of KABATA's board of directors. He said he was very happy to hear about the record of decision.

Asked what phase the bridge is in now, he said he thinks now is the time to start getting people talking about the project.

He said the issue has been kind of pushed aside of late and now is the time to change that.

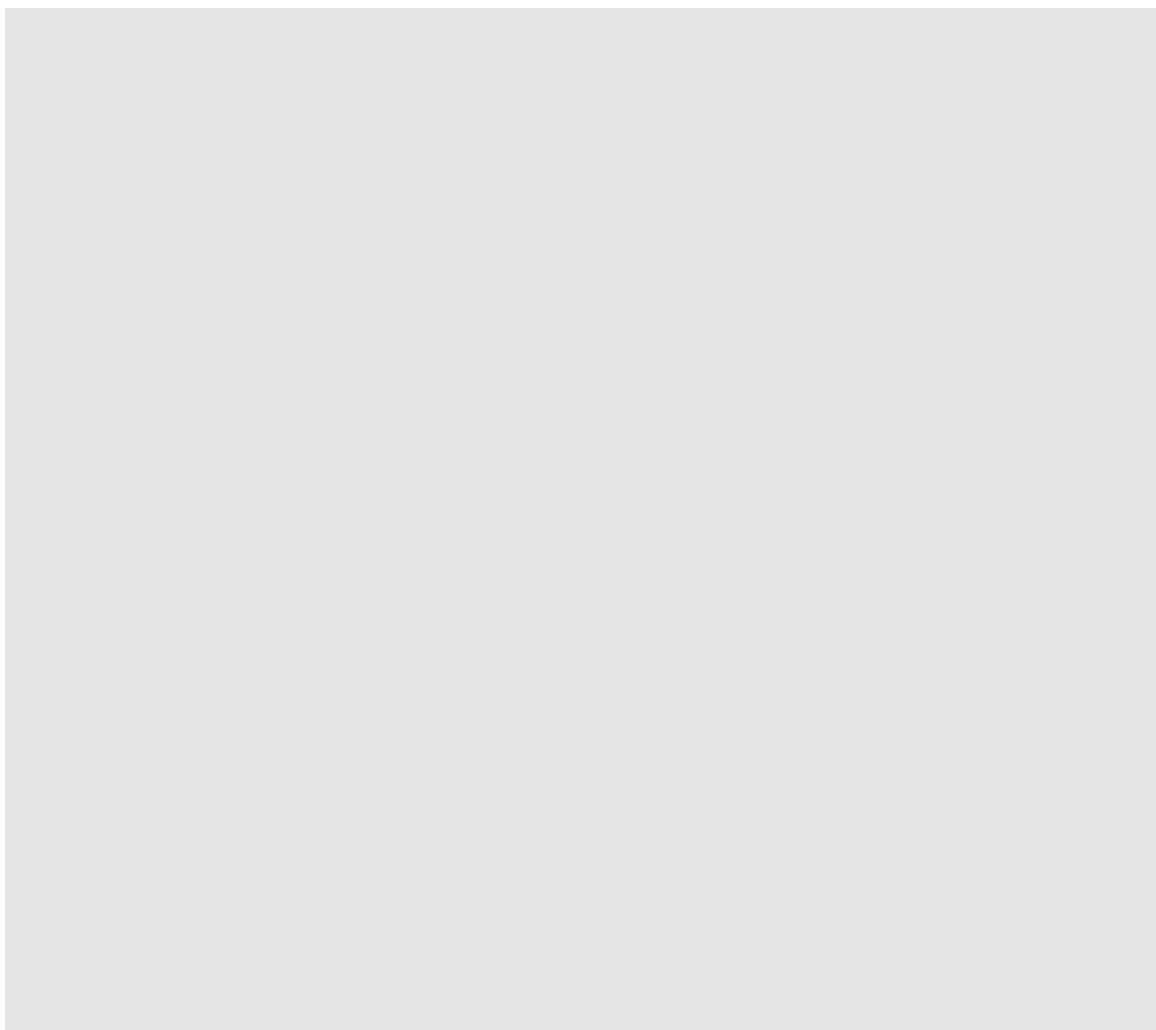
"That's been my direction, too, with KABATA is to get out there and start talking to the people and letting them know what's going on. Ultimately, it all comes down to the voice of the people," he said.

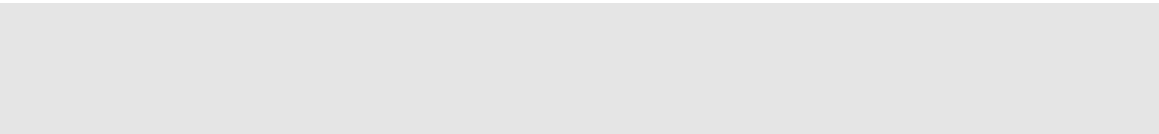
That voice is at times critical of the project. He said he's heard opinions that the bridge would soak up money needed elsewhere. But he thinks the bridge is a worthy project and noted that part of the route to getting it built will entail bringing on private investors who will recoup their money through bridge tolls.

Yes, there will be some public money in the mix, and it's not going to be cheap. He noted there were concerns about money when the Parks Highway was extended to Fairbanks. That project, he thinks, has proved its worth.

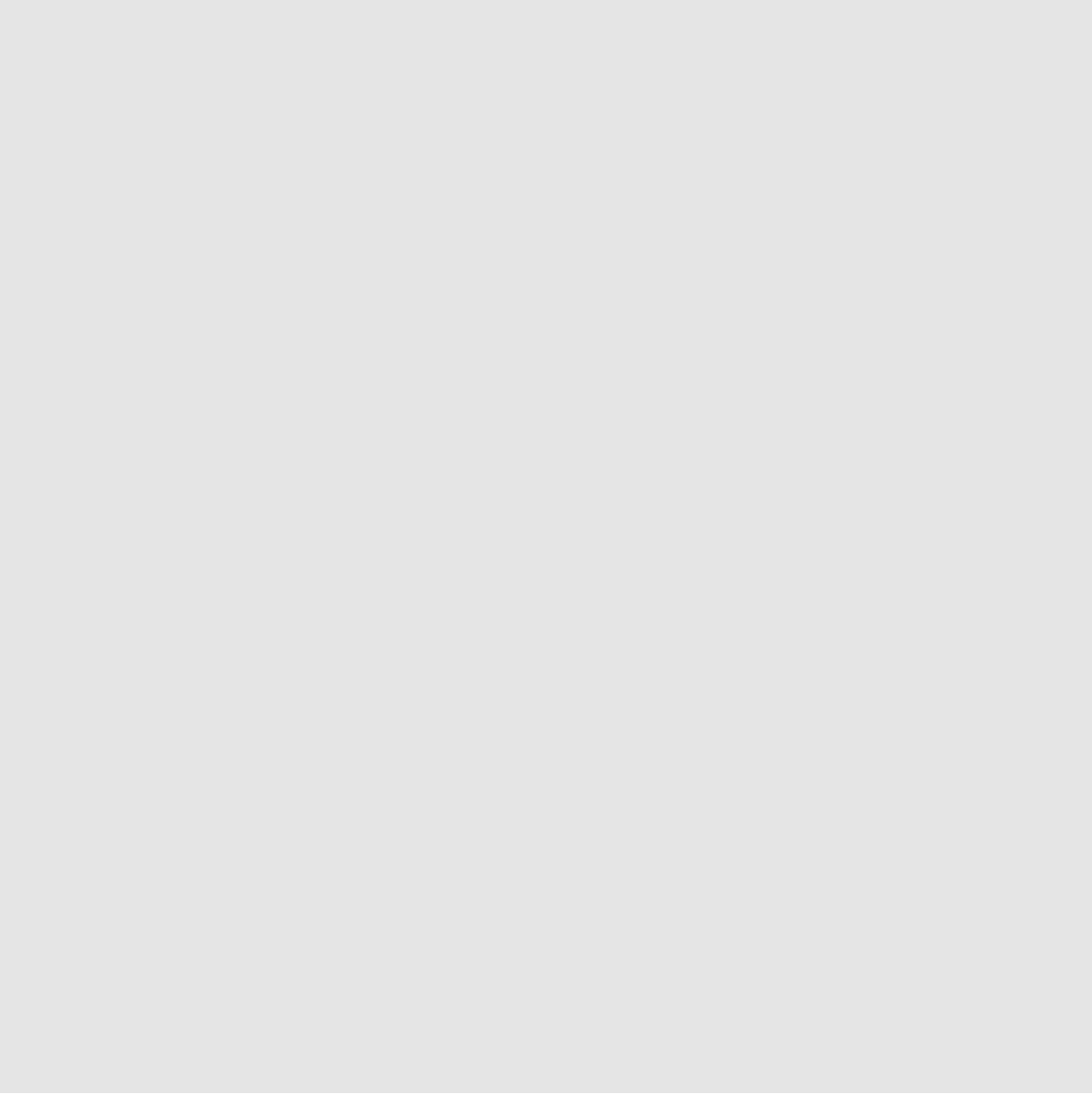
"All road projects take money," Neuman said.

Contact Andrew Wellner at andrew.wellner@frontiersman.com or 352-2270.

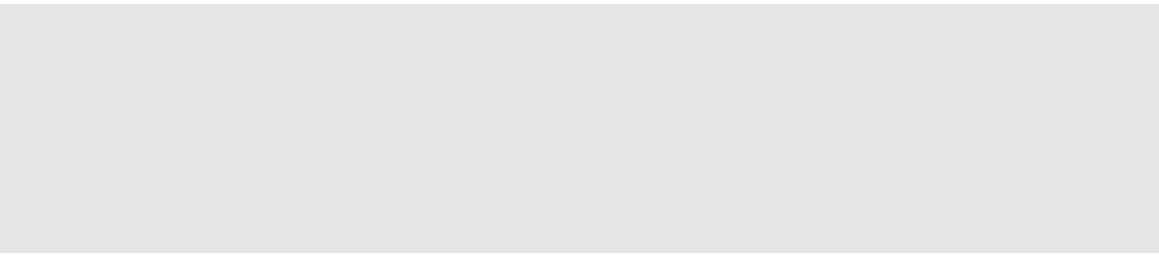


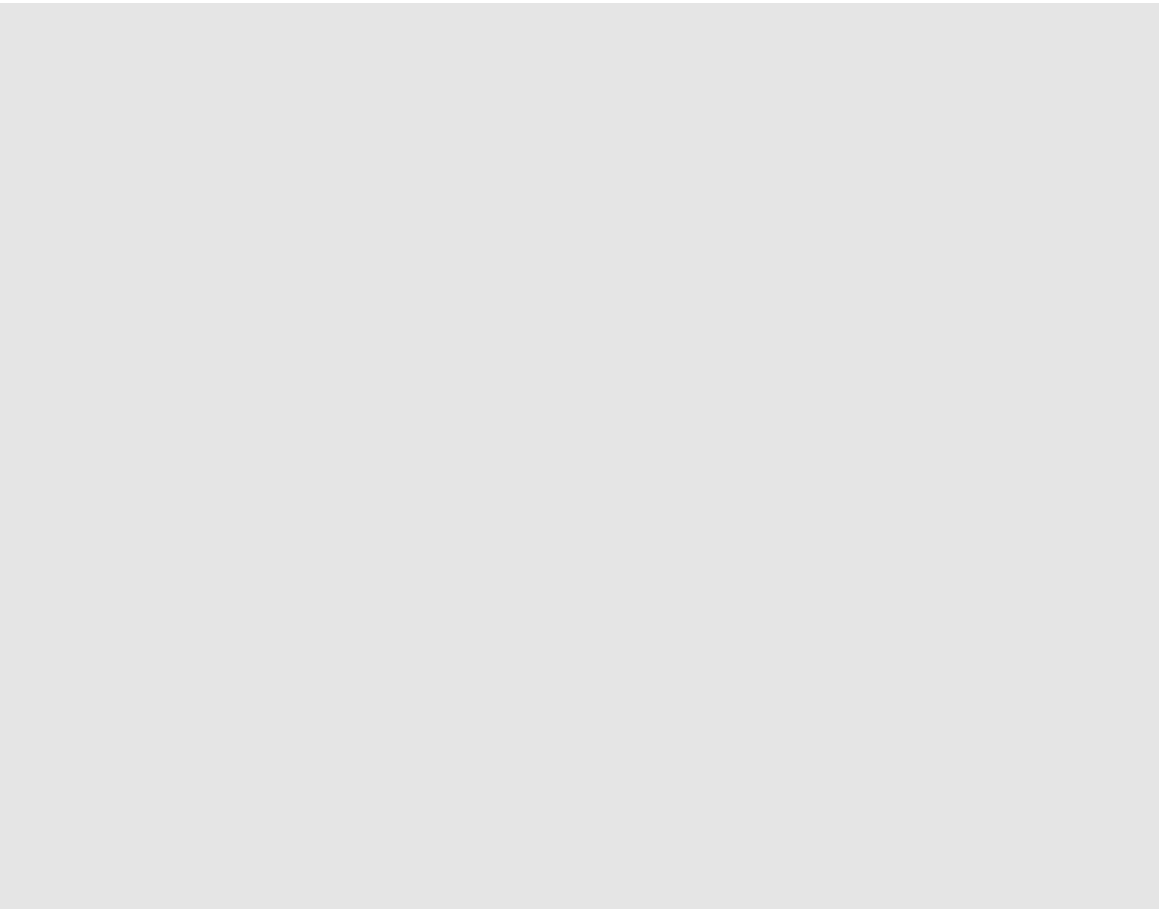


Guthire's 33 years in the business all about commitment



Nonprofit hopes to drop costs by \$60,000 a year as Wasilla City Council moves forward with plan to write grants on homeless shelter's behalf





PALMER — The Palmer Moose rushed for more than 2,000 yards during the regular seas...