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DOT may change its priorities for Knick bridge | Local News Stories

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By Hannah Guillaume/Frontiersman

MAT-SU - A controversial new \$600 million Mat-Su Valley bridge will rise if the Alaska Department of Transportation can organize funding.

Jeff Ottesen, director for the division of program development for DOT, said rerouting traffic onto the Knik Arm Bridge is good for commuters who know how cars pile up when the Glenn Highway shuts down. The bridge, also known as the “bridge to nowhere,” is included in the state's 2030 Long Range Transportation Plan due to the federal government this month, according to DOT consulting firm Dye Management.

The plan requires \$6 billion each year.

“Basically, we're short of the funds we need to do a full job,” Ottesen said.

He said Dye Management predicts \$800 million will be missing from spending for routine maintenance, preservation and system development of roadways, bridges, aviation and ferries every

year through 2030.

"That's with the amount of funding we've got for the system right now, today," Ottesen said.

With only \$600 million in the bank, the same cost projected for building the Knik Arm Bridge, Ottesen said that the 2030 transportation plan isn't producing a list of projects the state will fund or prioritize. Bridge construction costs, including \$92 million of federal and \$10 million of state funds, will be split with private, international partners chosen in 2008.

Ottesen said the 2030 transportation plan is fodder for the Mat-Su Borough to decide its transportation priorities for Valley commuters. This means projects like widening the Palmer Wasilla Highway and Knik Goose Bay Road are protected - in some form at least - in the 2030 transportation plan. Inflated construction costs in Alaska, which is twice as high as the national average of 30 percent, is part of the problem, and Ottesen said federal funding could drop by 25 percent in 2009.

The only way to deal with the decreasing revenue, he said, is to cut back on projects.

At a recent 2030 transportation plan meeting in Wasilla, Ottesen discussed three ways to reduce maintenance, operations, preservation and improvement costs. Redistribution of funding and strategies are developing, including ways to raise revenue, rearrange priorities and change the current management systems. It is too early to say how DOT will deal with the Knik Arm Bridge, which is getting local criticism because existing roads like the Palmer Wasilla Highway are cut from federal

funding.

Lois Epstein, director and project engineer for Alaska Transportation Priorities Project, a nonprofit group, criticized the DOT for putting the bridge above the Palmer Wasilla Highway on its list of federal funding priorities.

“There's a big gap between what is on the books and what is needing to be built,” Epstein said.

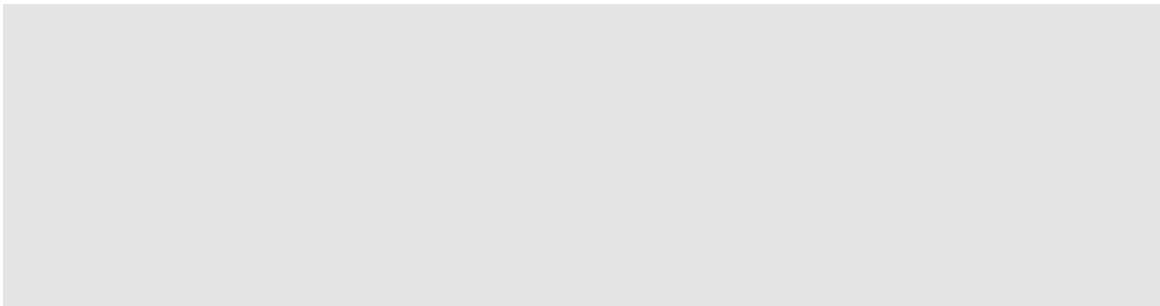
Ottesen agreed, adding that his unanswered questions about where Epstein's funding comes from are larger than the issues she raises.

Epstein said there are no provisions in the Legislature that require the Mat-Su Borough or Anchorage to give input for Knik Arm Bridge and Toll Authority. This means the bridge will reflect the wants of investors, not residents.

“So far, DOT has gone full steam ahead with those projects,” Epstein said. “DOT has not been up front and honest with us about the cost. Anything is doable with enough money.”

A commuter train could be a positive alternative to the bridge, Epstein said.

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