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Group sees Knik Arm project as example of waste | Juneau Empire

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JUNEAU — A Washington, D.C.-based watchdog group on Wednesday gave its “Golden Fleece” award for frivolous public spending to the Knik Arm bridge project in south-central Alaska.

Erich Zimmermann, a senior policy analyst with Taxpayers for Common Sense, said the award is given to projects seen as “particularly good examples of government waste.”

Taxpayers for Common Sense said on its website that the group behind the bridge project, the Knik Arm Bridge and Toll Authority, or KABATA, “has failed Alaska’s citizens and wasted millions of federal taxpayer dollars, with little to show for it.”

“Limited dollars and ever-growing needs mean only the most important projects be constructed,” the watchdog group said. “The Knik Arm Bridge fails to achieve this standard, the cheerleading of KABATA notwithstanding.”

KABATA spokeswoman Shannon McCarthy said it’s common for outside groups to disparage Alaska infrastructure projects. She took issue with some of the assertions by Taxpayers for Common Sense, including the estimated cost.

Zimmermann said his organization has been monitoring the project for years. He said the time has come to draw attention to it because the project seems to be going in the wrong direction.

A state legislative audit released in April found toll and revenue projections for the project to be “unreasonably optimistic” and projected cash flows to the state to likely be overstated as a result.

The audit stopped in its tracks a bill aimed at advancing the project, as lawmakers took a breather before deciding what to do next.

McCarthy said it was natural for lawmakers to take a step back, and she did not see what happened at the end of the legislative session as endangering the project.

KABATA was created by the state in 2003 to build a bridge connecting Anchorage and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. Supporters say the project would create new opportunities for business development and could pay for itself. But critics have questioned the need for the project and what the financial obligation to the state might be.

KABATA, in the wake of the audit, defended its traffic, revenue and financial models as the “most comprehensive ever completed for a transportation project in Alaska.”

McCarthy said the group recently signed a contract to review the socioeconomic data used by KABATA for the project, with a goal of providing policy makers and elected officials “additional assurance” about how extensive KABATA’s forecasting has been.