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# KABATA lives on, as does 'Bridge to Nowhere'

*Jerzy Shedlock*

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## **Alaska** Dispatch News

With the Alaska Legislature winding down, it looks like the Knik Arm Bridge and Toll Authority, otherwise known as KABATA, will operate for another year, pushing for a billion-dollar bridge between Anchorage and Point Mackenzie.

Alaska's legislative session is scheduled to end on Sunday night, so it's unlikely House Bill 23, which would fold KABATA into the Alaska Housing Finance Corp. (AHFC), will pass the state Senate, despite a hard push from the House.

State Senate President Charlie Huggins told The Associated Press the Senate would not rush its deliberations. Huggins, a supporter of the bridge project, said he expected the Senate -- busy late Saturday debating whether to slash taxes on the oil industry -- to take some more time to look at KABATA and not try to pass a bill this session.

The bridge, sometimes called "The Bridge to Nowhere," would connect Anchorage to undeveloped land near Point MacKenzie in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough.

The House Rules Committee worked late last week deciding whether to place AHFC in charge of the bonding authority. On Friday, the Alaska House took control of the project away from KABATA. Then, HB23 passed 24-15 in the House.

The Senate Finance Committee stalled the bill's progression, with Sen. Donny Olson, D-Golovin, arguing against it due to an unflattering legislative audit, which found KABATA's toll and traffic projection were "overly optimistic."

KABATA "is a money hole," Olson said, "and the state should be investing money into things like education."

Sen. Mike Dunleavy, R-Wasilla, disagreed, saying the project is not "just another boondoggle."

"The minute the bridge is done ... it will be used, and growth will continue," he said.

KABATA Chairman Mike Foster and Deputy Executive Director Judy Dougherty defended the authority's work and refuted the findings of the audit.

Dougherty said the audit found there was nothing wrong with the authority's process. Rather, the findings of the audit were blown out of proportion. She noted six traffic studies had been performed since KABATA's creation. The studies were used to evaluate the project's potential. Some of the studies were conducted for other projects, like the Highway 2 project that would connect the Seward and Glenn Highways and create an

Anchorage thoroughfare.

The legislative auditors used one Department of Transportation traffic study to refute KABATA's projections, Dougherty said.

Olson repeatedly stuck with the audit's findings, stating KABATA has overestimated the ability for the bridge to make money. He said he didn't want the state to end up subsidizing the bridge.

HB23 set up a \$1.14 billion capital reserve fund used to pay a developer if revenues from tolls fell short or there was some other unforeseen problem that affected the bridge's finances, The AP reported.

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Jerzy Shedlock is a reporter. A graduate of the University of Alaska Anchorage, he worked at the Peninsula Clarion before coming to Alaska Dispatch News.

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