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Knik Bridge circus shows need for better Alaska decision making

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For five years as a volunteer I have followed the bizarre and changing plans for financing the Knik Arm Bridge. Through this process, I've become less concerned about the project's huge price tag than about a larger question: how can the state make better decisions?

I would suggest four steps.

First:

We need more objective information from credible consultants and that information to be made public.

After a scathing legislative audit [identifying over-optimistic population and toll revenue projections](#), the Knik Arm Bridge and Toll Authority bought statewide radio ads last year promising a

fresh start on new socioeconomic data. The new data would forecast toll revenue critical to understanding the real cost of the project.

The original three-month job for revised population projections report was due a year ago, and the new traffic and toll revenue report (from the same consultant criticized in the legislative audit) is presumably also done, since state records show both consultants have already been paid \$1,312,260 for their work.

Those two reports have yet to be made public. Instead, two Public Records Act requests and a recent administrative appeal to the transportation commissioner have been denied with the explanation that the reports would likely be available -- are you sitting down? -- in November.

How can the state claim a "deliberative process" exemption to the Public Records Act when there is no good reason to keep the data secret that is used to make decisions?

Unfortunately, those seeking the reports on the costs and choices for a Juneau access road, Medicaid expansion or National Guard records recognize the pattern of the state denying information unless citizens sue.

A key credibility test for any administration is its track record in following the Public Records Act and releasing studies regardless of whether that information calls into question the administration's own policies and actions.

Second:

The Legislature needs to insist on adequate credible information before making decisions. The Legislature's approval of HB 23 to finance the bridge project alleged to cost \$894 million contingent on a federal loan was based on just a one-page finance plan. That plan contained no estimate for toll revenue.

My request to the Department of Revenue for a simple schedule showing the estimated annual toll revenue to make scheduled bond payments was denied with the explanation that the department had not asked its consultant for those basic calculations. The requirement from high school tests to "show your work" should apply as well to state consultants, and the Legislature should review that work before approving billion-dollar projects.

Third:

We need state government to be forthright about budget choices. Each year the Department of Transportation releases a statewide Transportation Plan. Adding another \$55 million for the bridge project, \$592 million in proposed state and federal bonds, and \$226 million in speculative future federal funds should have resulted in a list of projects now crowded out by the bridge. Instead, local officials have scrambled to compare the new and old plans to discover that old projects for upgrading the Glenn, Parks and Dalton highways, Egan Drive, Richardson and Nondalton are now apparently postponed or deleted.

By describing the selection of funded transportation projects as only the result of project readiness and the timing of expected

funds, the Department of Transportation has been allowed to control discussions so as to avoid framing real choices. With declining federal gas tax money and nearly a billion that is set aside for the bridge, this hide-the-choices game should soon be over.

Finally:

Better elected officials would help. In picking candidates I would suggest we forget labels. My experience is that the word "conservative" in Alaska has become meaningless. For most districts that might be the smarter brand to run under but that label is useless in predicting who, once in state office, will insist on objective information and be strong enough to make decisions based on public need and fiscal prudence rather than just responding to contractor and narrow interests in front of them. I have found heroes in both parties willing to do that job but so far I do not think there are enough of them.

Whether or not you think a commitment to the Knik Bridge is a good use of a \$1 billion (my number is about \$2 billion), I would argue that unless Alaska has an administration and legislators more willing to acquire objective data on projects from credible consultants, act transparently and frame honest choices, decisions are not going to get better.

With declining oil revenues, I think they need to.

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