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# Late compromise revives bridge | Local News Stories

*Steve Quinn For the Frontiersman*

10-12 minutes

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JUNEAU — It took four years — two full legislative sessions, including overtime in the final year — but Rep. Mark Neuman's push to advance a \$900 million Knik Arm bridge project has paid off.

On the 95th and final day of the 2014 legislative session, the House and Senate solidly backed a compromise bill authorizing the state Department of Transportation and Public Facilities to manage the construction and financing of the controversial project to construct a 2-mile span across Knik Arm to connect Anchorage with Point MacKenzie.

Bridge critics contend the project is too costly and would funnel limited money away from more urgent infrastructural concerns, like maintenance and upkeep of existing roads.

But supporters, like Neuman and most of the Mat-Su legislative delegation, have long said the project will bring several benefits to the region, including affordable housing on both sides of the bridge, construction jobs, increased safety that comes with reduced highway congestion, and a reduced commute for some

residents.

“It’s a good thing, a real good thing,” said Neuman, a Big Lake Republican. “This is a huge economic opportunity for the state, and it’s making our roads safer for the 34,000 Alaskans who have to commute. You’ll have access to the gas pipeline termination in Point MacKenzie and other economic opportunities.”

For the second time, the Knik Bridge Arm and Toll Authority gets removed from the construction and financing. Should the bridge get built, KABATA will resume its role as the operator.

Last year the House turned the project over to the Alaska Housing Financing Corp. But the Senate restored KABATA’s role while drafting a new financing structure: a mix of federal loans and grants; state bonds; and small contributions from the state’s general fund.

A special committee made up of three members each of the House and Senate pulled off the bridge deal that looked dead when the House failed to approve the Senate’s version on day 93.

Two days later, on Friday, the Senate passed Neuman’s House Bill 23 on a 14-4 vote. The House passed it, 28-10.

Only one member of this group, known as the free conference committee for its ability to make drastic changes in legislation to facilitate compromise, had any Mat-Su ties – House Finance Co-Chair Bill Stoltze, R-Chugiak. The rest came from Anchorage, Kodiak and the Kenai Peninsula.

Three members came from Anchorage (Sens. Berta Gardner, a

Democrat, and Lesil McGuire, a Republican, plus House Rep. Harriett Drummond, also a Democrat).

A fourth came from Soldotna, Senate Republican Peter Micciche, and another from Kodiak, the committee's chairman Rep. Alan Austerman, a Republican.

"I think it's a better bill; I think it's a better process the way it's set up," Austerman said. "I think that everyone should be happy with the fact that we will move forward in building a bridge as long as they can secure the federal loans.

"I think it gives a lot more transparency as to what the obligations of the state of Alaska are at this point. It takes away any ambiguities over who was responsible for getting the bonds and who is responsible for getting the loans."

The KABATA board's role between now and when a bridge gets built remains uncertain. But that did not require addressing at this point, Austerman said after the final committee hearing.

"I don't know what the KABATA board will end up looking like," Austerman said while addressing his colleagues on the House floor. "I think it's too early to say, and I think it's too early to try and define that. There are a number of things that have to happen after this bill has passed."

The bill picked up 10 more House supporters in the final vote than it had in a previous House vote that prompted the conference committee.

One of those votes belonged to Rep. Mike Hawker, who says his Anchorage district has had a "love-hate" relationship with the project.

“There has been a real history of this project frightening my people,” Hawker said before the House gave its approval. “That it was going to consume all of the road money that was needed for safety improvements on the Seward Highway.

“The bridge project is truly, I believe, economically warranted in this state. That direct transportation connection from Anchorage-north is something that is important to the state of Alaska. It is part of our future development.”

Neuman endured four years of hearings and one-on-one meetings with fellow lawmakers, finding himself on the 95th day of this session being a spectator in the conference committee. He calmly watched, believing the bill’s time had finally come.

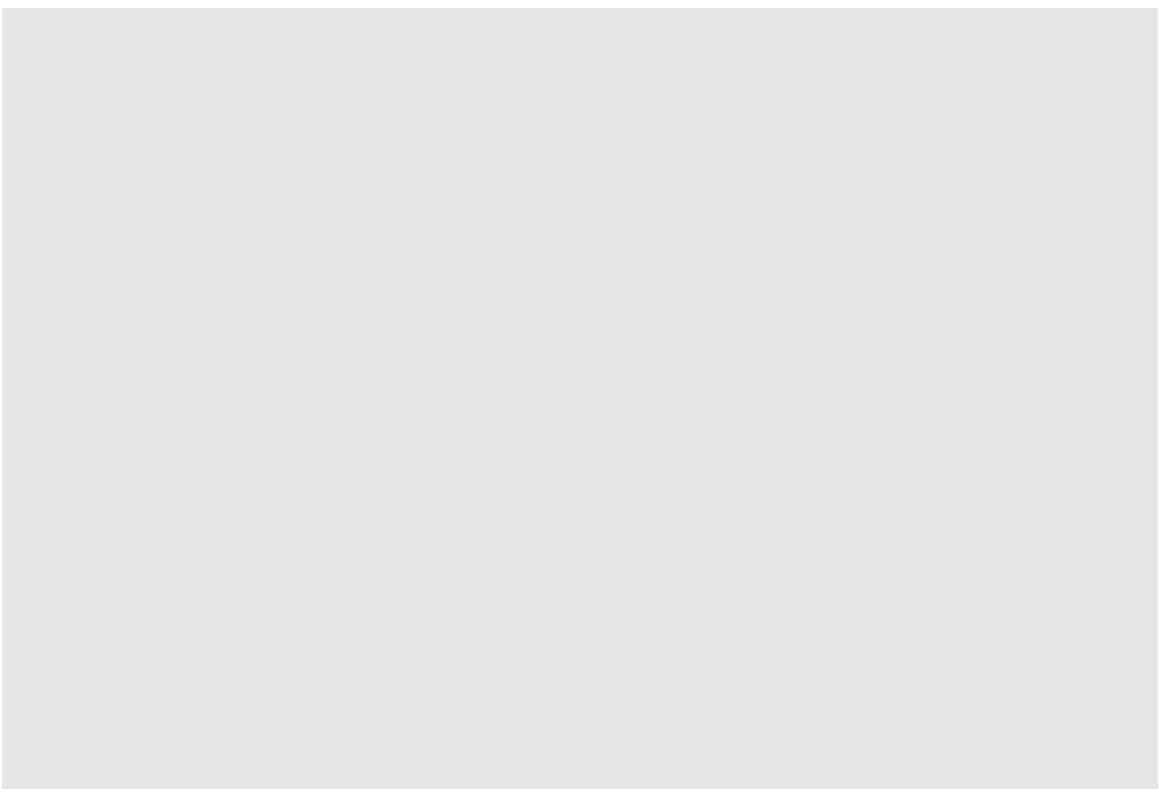
“It was worth it,” Neuman said. “I knew there was support for the bridge. It’s just the legislative process. The bottom line is we’re going to get a bridge built.”

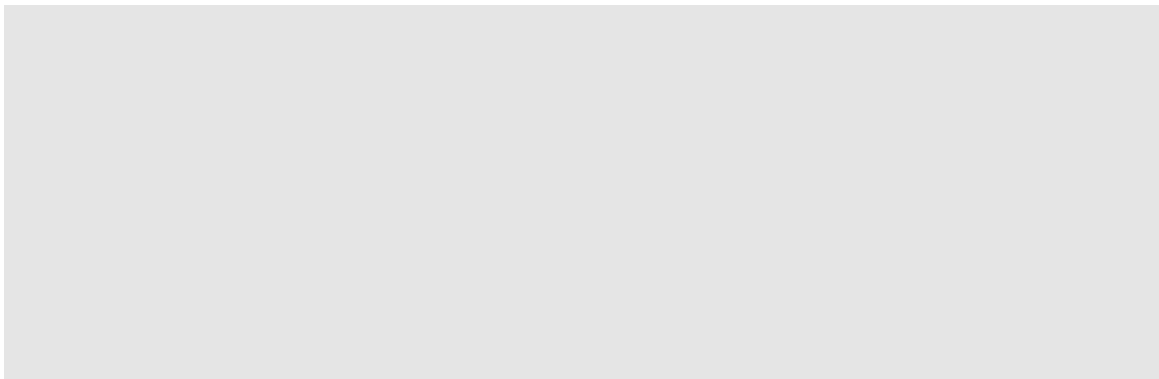
Freelance reporter Steve Quinn is a veteran Alaska journalist who formerly covered state government for the Associated Press.



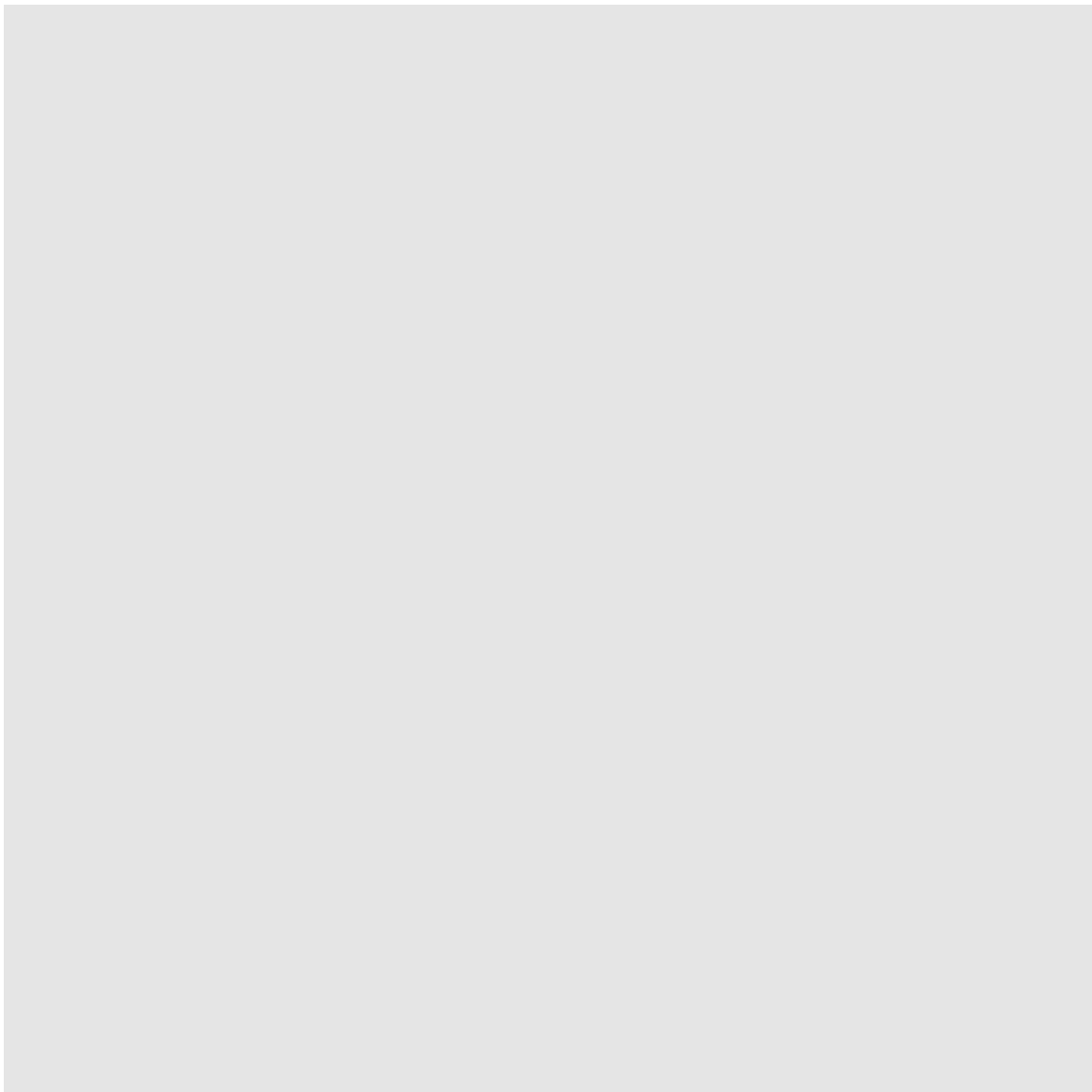


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