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The Bridge to Nowhere-Except-Your-Wallet Keeps Chugging Along

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Remember Alaska's "bridges to nowhere" that created a [flurry of controversy](#) in 2005 and then were an issue in the 2008 presidential race? They became national symbols of earmarks and wasteful spending. But boondoggles are hard to kill. The Gravina Island Bridge, which would shave seven minutes off the trip between a town of 8,000 and its airport, [received funding](#) in the 2011 federal transportation bill.

And now Steven Mufson [reports](#) in the *Washington Post* that the Knik Arm Bridge, which would connect Anchorage to "the fast-growing borough of Matanuska-Susitna, also known as Mat-Su," is still looking for private, state, or most likely federal funding. Mat-Su is home to 89,000 people, spread out "over an area nearly as large as West Virginia. Most of the residents live near highways to Anchorage or in places such as Wasilla, where the commute to Anchorage would be 12 minutes faster on existing land routes than it would be via the new bridge, [financial analyst Jamie] Kenworthy said."

Some people are enthusiastic about the project, though:

“The interest in the Knik Arm Crossing project is amazing,” Alaska state Sen. Linda Menard said on her Facebook page this summer after attending a Citigroup-sponsored conference on public-private projects. “I’ve just finished meetings in New York City with the largest investment companies on Earth. All of them are vying to be chosen to partner with Alaska to build the bridge. The future is here!”

Yes, the largest investment companies — and the largest construction companies — would be delighted to work on this project, if someone else would actually put up the money. Kenworthy made a pretty obvious point about financing such projects:

“Anyone who got beyond seventh-grade math would know that the private sector wouldn’t do that,” said Kenworthy, an independent analyst and critic of the bridge. “Only the taxpayers would do that.”

So true. And yet, not exactly true. If you went out on the street and asked taxpayers if they wanted to pony up \$715 million — to start with — for a bridge that might or might not help thousands of people get to Anchorage faster, you can bet the answer would be no. What Kenworthy really means is, “Only the politicians — spending other people’s money — would do that.”

And not the politicians representing the 290,000 people of Anchorage and the 89,000 people of Mat-Su, you betcha. It would be way too expensive and way too visible to try to spend that kind of local tax money. How about the legislators who represent all 700,000 Alaskans? Would they ask for \$1,000 in

initial funding from every man, woman, and child in Alaska? Not likely. And indeed, one prominent Alaskan made that point pretty bluntly in 2007:

A trove of e-mails from former governor Sarah Palin, released in June, showed that she was no fan of the project....

On July 31 that year, she wrote: “As for Kabata, I hope folks know my intention is to continue to NOT support the nonsensical notion that the state can fund Gravina and/or Knik Crossing. If the feds can’t fund these projects that have minimal public support, then they’re not going to happen.”

Exactly. Only when you lump projects like this in with boondoggles — and a few useful projects — all over the country can you make the funding sufficiently distant from actual taxpayers to be able to get it passed. Does any taxpayer know what was actually in the Surface Transportation Extension Act of 2011 or the omnibus [appropriations bill](#) of 2009 or the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 or the “The Transportation Equity Act — a Legacy for Users,” or [TEA-LU](#), of 2005? Of course not. But federal politicians, with lots of advice from lobbyists and back-home politicians and little oversight by actual taxpayers, pass these massive bills that require the people of every state to fund distant projects that they know nothing about and will never use. This may be “[Don Young’s Way](#),” as the Knik Arm project is named in honor of the venerable Alaska congressman who keeps laboring to extract tax dollars from New York and Florida for his local road, but it’s also Congress’s way. This is what happens when you push road and bridge funding from the local area to the state to the federal

government. And it leads to \$14 trillion in national debt.