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Time to pull plug on Knik Arm bridge: Transportation boondoggle's funding request rejected again | Editorials

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News-Miner opinion: The latest reality check for the beleaguered Knik Arm bridge project came in early February, though the public wasn't informed until last week. A Feb. 9 letter from federal authorities rejected the state's request for a loan of more than \$375 million to build the bridge from Anchorage across the Knik Arm to Point Mackenzie. Although the bridge's uneconomic nature has been clear for some time to federal officials and many Alaskans, it continues to hold unexplainable sway in the minds of many legislators and Gov. Bill Walker's administration. In the face of a \$4 billion budget deficit, they should stop throwing good money after bad.

The Knik Arm bridge idea was an attempt to solve an Anchorage population problem. With real estate in Alaska's largest city at a premium, rents are up and vacancies down, resulting in substantial growth in commuter communities nearby such as Eagle River, Chugiak and even Matanuska-Susitna towns such as Palmer and Wasilla. The bridge across the Knik Arm is touted

as a way to ease that population pressure and provide a quicker way for many to travel to and from Anchorage.

But problems have dogged the project since its conception. While the route to Anchorage would be somewhat shorter for those in the communities of Big Lake and Houston, for those in Wasilla, it would be a coin-flip, and for those in towns closer to Anchorage, such as Palmer, Eagle River and Chugiak, the existing route via the Glenn Highway would be both quicker and less congested. The proposed bridge, too, would end in Anchorage's downtown core, an area already plagued by traffic snarls during workday commuting times.

It hasn't helped that revenue estimates from bridge backers have been repeatedly shown to be woefully optimistic. The Knik Arm Bridge and Toll Authority, the primary entity promoting the bridge, based its financial assumptions on repaying loans for the project with tolls from drivers. But with tolls estimated at approximately \$5 each way and a construction cost estimated at \$1.5 billion in a 2009 federal highway study, it only takes cocktail-napkin math to show how unlikely that repayment plan would be. A total of 300 million transits over the bridge would be required to pay back the construction cost without interest. With free access to Anchorage already closer for most, it would take a long time for the bridge to reach that level of use. Even Anchorage mayor Ethan Berkowitz, whose city would be the primary beneficiary of the bridge, opposes it.

Questionable assumptions about traffic are a factor the federal Department of Transportation cited in its latest rejection of a federal loan for the project. In its rejection letter, the department

told state authorities they needed to “significantly reduce some aggressive assumptions” about traffic and revenue. This is a kind way of saying that federal authorities do not see a way for the bridge to be economically viable, something those in state government should have recognized long ago. It’s time to pull the plug.

At a time when the state is running a \$4 billion deficit and funding is being slashed for much more worthy priorities, the \$160 million in state money allocated to the Knik Arm bridge project is an affront to sensible budgeting. It should be shut down immediately and the money reallocated to more worthy projects in desperate need of funding. The University of Alaska Fairbanks’ half-finished engineering building, for instance, could be completed with a fraction of that money.

It’s time for Gov. Bill Walker and legislators to acknowledge reality and end the Knik Arm bridge boondoggle. In its difficult financial position, Alaska has no money to spend on megaprojects that are so clearly uneconomic.