

My Turn: Why not?

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"You see things; and you say, 'Why?' But I dream things that never were; and I say, 'Why not?'" — George Bernard Shaw

"Continue on the highway and enjoy a beautiful 2.5-hour drive. The route takes you past historic Klondike mining districts... through dramatic rocky landscapes of mountains before descending down a breathtaking winding road to your destination... on the shores of beautiful Lynn Canal."

Sounds wonderful, doesn't it? Taken from tourism brochures describing part of the road between Skagway and Carcross known as the southern Klondike Highway and in our region as part of the Golden Circle, it describes why this road is appreciated by thousands of travelers each year. Completed over 40 years ago, it was the last major highway constructed in Alaska. But it could describe another highway that hasn't yet been built.

Given the current debate over the proposed Lynn Canal Highway linking Juneau, Haines, Skagway and Whitehorse, it is useful to examine the history of Skagway's road to see if any lessons can be drawn.

The story of the southern section of the Klondike Highway is complicated. Even after a railroad was completed in 1900, there was talk of pushing a wagon road through from Skagway to Whitehorse. However, with the railroad providing efficient, though arguably expensive, service to the Interior, it was a very low priority. Although some construction occurred sporadically, the highway project wasn't revived in any serious way until 1961. Of course, even then, the construction of this road had its detractors saying it was too expensive, unsafe and could never be built.

Nevertheless, that year, a crew of Skagway volunteers, and then the State of Alaska, began work on the toughest part of the road, blasting through the solid granite of the Coastal Mountains. But it wasn't until May 23, 1981, that a handful of politicians attended a ceremony at a spot at the base of a hill called Liars' Camp in Skagway to formally dedicate the highway.

The completion of the Klondike Highway resulted in vastly more efficient travel, both for private and commercial vehicles. A year after the highway dedication, the railroad, unable to compete, ceased all operations.

Today, approximately 132,000 vehicles annually utilize this road to move goods, provide services and transport tourists from Skagway to the Interior. Summer volumes can exceed 700 vehicles daily. The economic benefits attributable to this road, unforeseen at the time of its construction, have easily repaid the cost of the road many times over. While the environmental effects proved to be negligible,

it's doubtful that same road could be built today without years of delays caused by lawsuits and environmental opposition. Also true is that while the replacement of their expensive inefficient transportation system was initially painful, eventually it proved to be beneficial.

And yes, the Klondike Highway traverses sections where avalanches can occur just as the proposed Lynn Canal Highway would. But avalanche hazards can be managed, and, in the 45 years since 1969, not one single life has been lost by the traveling public due to an avalanche anywhere in the State of Alaska. More to the point, on a per-mile basis, the avalanche hazard index of the Lynn Canal Highway would be less than Thane Road in Juneau.

It isn't lost on most of us that exploring new territory, dreaming of new ways to enjoy life, and building things — especially large projects — requires vision and determination. It's how our country and state were built. And it's the reason the Skagway road was built. It is far easier to be a naysayer and come up with reasons why we can't do something instead of figuring out how we can get it done.

It's more than a little ironic now that some people in Skagway and Haines, communities that have benefited tremendously (especially economically) from their roads, are arguing that the Lynn Canal Highway should not be built because it is unsafe and environmentally unsound.

And yet the Klondike Road is a perfect example of how a road can be built safely without harming the environment while improving their quality of life and expanding the economy.

This will happen with the Lynn Canal Highway as well. Only this isn't a dream — it's real.

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