

Juneau access

It's hard to believe.

In 1898, it took 26 months to construct the 110-mile White Pass and Yukon Railroad. In 1942 it took 234 days to build the 1,390-mile Alaska Highway. In 1971 after about 12 years of work, the 323-mile Parks Highway was completed.

The last major road built in Alaska was the Klondike Highway, begun in 1975 and completed in 1981. Yes, it's been 32 years since Alaska has built a new highway, and during that time our population has grown from 418,493 to 731,449.

Since 1993 the state has been trying to build Juneau Access, a road connecting Alaska's capital city to the Alaska Highway system. Juneau is the largest city on the mainland of North America not connected to the continental highway system — but it can be.

The 51 miles of new road would go from Echo Cove, approximately 40 miles north of Juneau, up the east side of Lynn Canal. At the Katzechin River, a small ferry would shuttle cars and passengers to continental highway connections in Skagway and Haines.

The effort to build the Lynn Canal Highway (LCH) has spanned five Alaska governors going back to Gov. Walter Hickel's second administration. The Alaska Department of

Transportation & Public Facilities (DOT/PF) has completed numerous field studies and economic, environmental and engineering assessments. All necessary permits have been issued. The project is the most "shovel ready" on DOT's docket, yet not a single shovel of dirt has been turned.

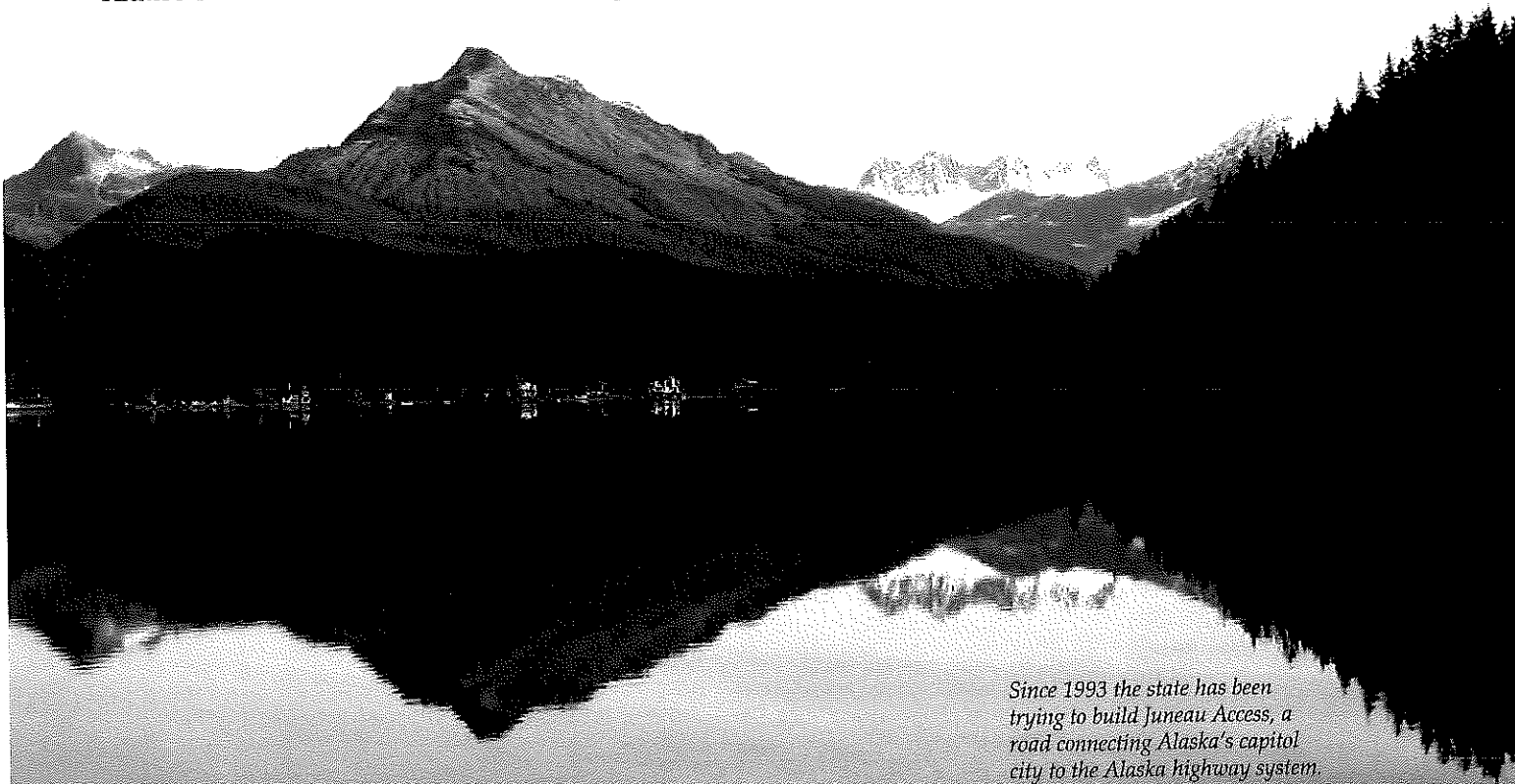
History

Alaska's public surface transportation consists of highways and ferries. When we became a state in 1958, the federal Bureau of Public Roads (formerly the Alaska Road Commission) turned the network of roads and transportation corridors over to the state Department of Highways. I was one of the young engineers on the team tasked with planning, designing and constructing our new state's transportation system. Early milestones included creation of the Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS) in 1962, while several other basic route corridors were studied and long-range plans developed.

When initiated 50 years ago, ferry service was never meant to provide a permanent solution to transporta-



By SAND IAMS



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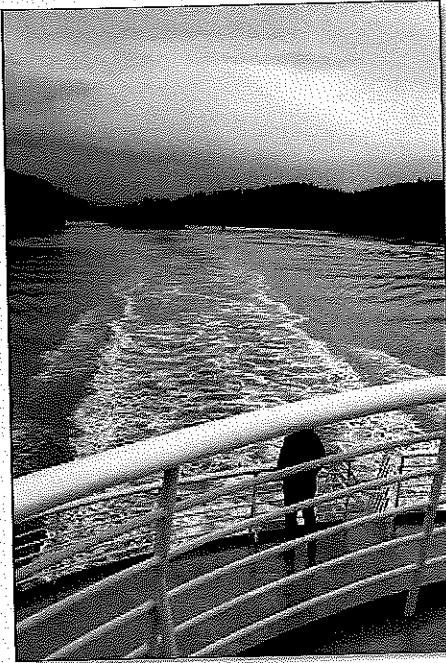


Photo: Justin Ritter


For 50 years the Alaska Marine Highway System has used the current model to provide surface transportation to communities not connected by roads.

tion in Southeast Alaska. The AMHS was conceived as an interim service to coastal communities. Roads were always envisioned as the state developed its infrastructure and began to plan and provide for future growth.

The 1964 earthquake put transportation planning on hold while we repaired existing highways and critical infrastructure. Reconstruction took priority over building new roads and Alaska's planned transportation system was set back for years. Just as we began to recover from the financial effects of the earthquake, Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act in 1969. Projects that once could move forward quickly and efficiently became bogged down by litigation and an ever-growing federal bureaucracy.

Instead of relying on professional engineering, economic and environmental studies, we are now forced to deal with the most miniscule and inconsequential details contained within federal regulations, not to protect the environment but to lower risk of a lawsuit from activist groups. It's a daunting task just to issue a draft environmental impact study. After any EIS is complete we are typically hit with court challenges at every level.

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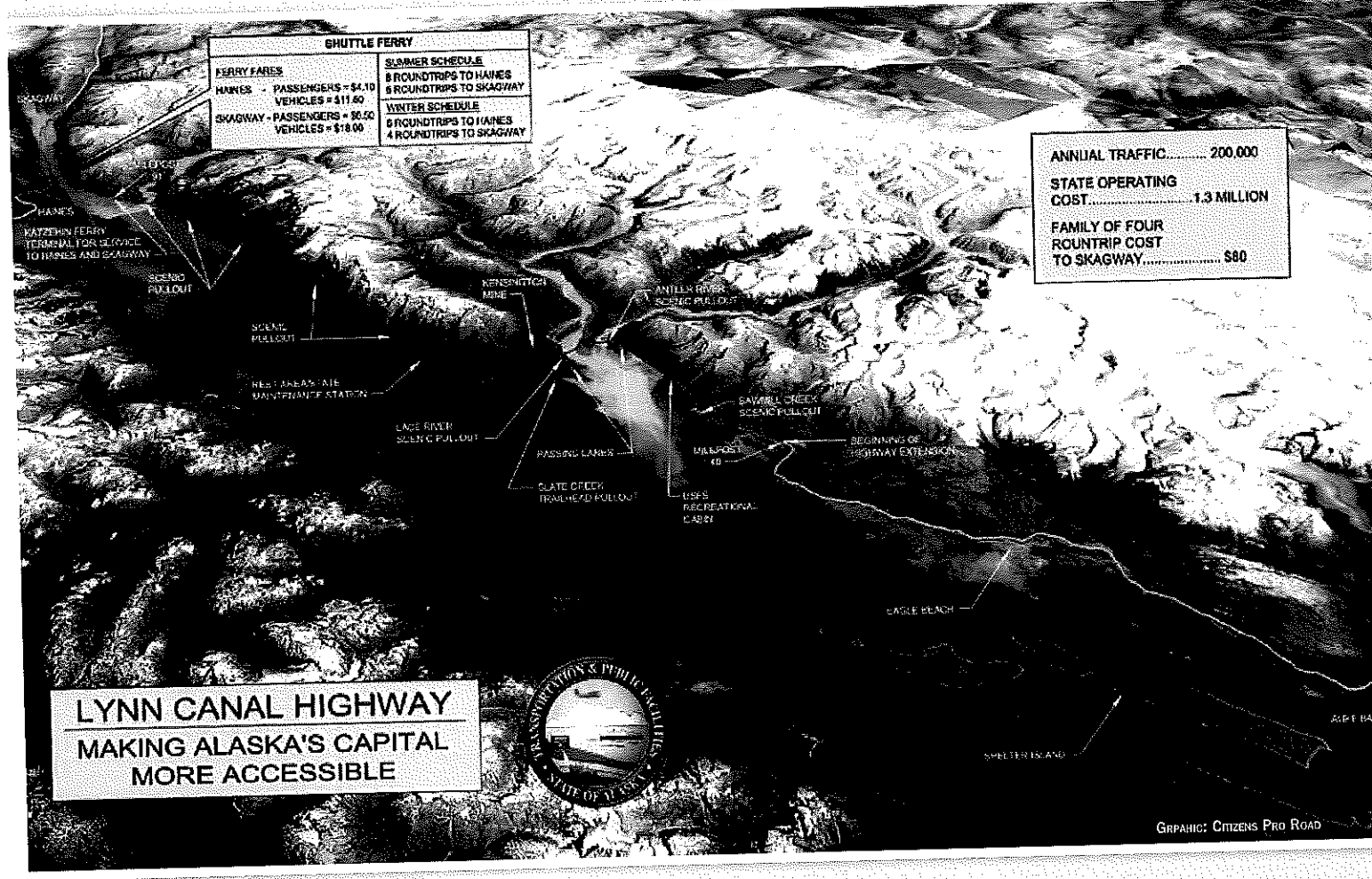
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Process

In January 2000, Gov. Tony Knowles declared the East Lynn Canal route as the preferred alternative for Juneau Access — then abruptly suspended work on the project and ordered two new ferries instead.

Gov. Frank Murkowski restarted the road process in December 2002. The Record of Decision was issued by the Federal Highway Administration in April 2006, and two months later the necessary state permits were issued. Army Corps of Engineers' permits were issued in June 2008. Lawsuits predictably followed, and the highway's fate has been bounced around the federal court system ever since.

U.S. District Court Judge John Sedwick granted the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council (SEACC) an injunction to stop all work on the road in February 2009. Ferry service, Sedwick insisted, could improve transportation without building a road. The state appealed, but in May 2011, the Ninth Circuit Court in San Francisco agreed with Judge Sedwick and SEACC.

SEACC's law firm, Earthjustice, celebrated the Ninth Circuit's decision and called on the governor to direct state resources to more ferries and better ferry service. The question we asked then was, "How exactly will taking money and ferry service from other communities in Southeast benefit our region or the state of Alaska as a whole?" The dissenting Ninth Circuit Court justice correctly characterized this solution as "robbing Peter to pay Paul."

At the direction of Gov. Sean Parnell, the DOT/PF is currently addressing the "solution" imposed by the Ninth Circuit Court by completing a supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS). The SEIS is delving more deeply into the infeasibility of the "no action" or "no-build" alternative that was soundly rejected in the original EIS. The draft SEIS is expected to be released this fall and the final EIS in early 2014.

Facts about ferries and roads

In Alaska, 99.5 percent of vehicular traffic occurs on highways. The annual state cost to maintain highways is about \$105 million. Highways generate about \$85 million in revenues through gas tax receipts and licensing and registration fees, providing 80 percent of the amount needed to operate and maintain our state highways.

Only 0.5 percent of the vehicular traffic in Alaska occurs on ferries. The annual state cost to operate and maintain ferries is \$160 million. Users pay about \$50 million of that to travel on state ferries, so for every \$3 it costs to operate the AMHS, the state pays \$2 and users pay \$1. A generous subsidy.

Currently the AMHS operates 11 ferries and wants two more to replace existing vessels. Even with the subsidy, the system transports just two-thirds the traffic it carried when it had seven ferries. Ferry travel, in spite of the subsidy, remains very costly for users, driving down ridership and depressing local economies.

Fares can't be lowered unless the state subsidy increases, state costs can't be reduced unless users pay more, and service can't be increased without a corresponding decrease somewhere else in the system. For 50 years the AMHS has used the current model to provide surface transportation to communities not connected by roads. The result is the most lopsided appropriation in the entire state budget. More ships, more fuel and more ferry workers haven't fixed — and won't fix — its problems.

The Lynn Canal Highway would shorten the northern terminus of the system by 100 miles and eliminate the need for two mainline ferries in Lynn Canal. Hundreds of millions of dollars in capital and operating outlays would be saved. The total estimated cost to build the road is \$500 million, including \$483 million for highway construction and \$17 million for ferry terminal construction. The road could transport an unlimited number of vehicles and still save the state more than \$10 million per year.

Most initial road costs are permanent or long-term in nature. Bridges last 75-plus years. Portions of the Richardson Highway have gone without major upgrades for 50 years. Unlike ferries that need frequent and costly annual maintenance, roads require only occasional improvements to sustain them. They also promote economic development, create jobs and always spur private sector investment, especially small businesses, along the routes.

Public opinion

Juneau's business community supports the road, as do Sen. Dennis Egan, Rep. Cathy Munoz, Mayor Merrill Sanford and several members of the Juneau Assembly. Cathie Roemmich, the Chief Executive Officer of the Juneau Chamber of Commerce and member of the state's Marine Transportation Advisory Board, says, "The way the ferry system is currently configured is not sustainable. To save the system we've got to extend roads and switch to less expensive dayboats with smaller crews and lower fuel costs. The Lynn Canal Highway is critical."

Construction of the Lynn Canal Highway will provide both short-term and long-term construction and service industry jobs for the region.

Operating Engineers Local 302 District 8 representative Corey Baxter is one of many in the Alaska workforce who wants to build the road. "We think the road will save the state and travelers a tremendous amount of money, enough to finance the entire project. But those savings won't begin until the job gets done. Our Operating Engineers Local 302 members are ready to go to work to get it done."

Trade unions and business associations aren't alone in their support. Juneau fisherman Jim Becker says the road would provide a reliable transportation corridor that would create new markets, cut transportation costs and create an economic benefit to Juneau and northern Southeast.

"The Lynn Canal highway would provide an opportunity to establish new fresh fish markets in the Lower 48. An average of 40,000 to 50,000 pounds of salmon, halibut and black cod could be shipped out every day during the season once Juneau has a road. Even with the short ferry shuttle link, it will be virtually a 24/7 transportation corridor for delivering seafood to market."


Opposition

Citing environmental and engineering concerns — from sea lions to avalanches — road opponents insist ferries are a better alternative. They claim the proposed road is unacceptable because it would cut across 61 avalanche paths and six landslide areas and would be closed for much of the winter due to avalanche risks. (DOT/PF predicts 34 days of annual road closure for avalanche control with an average closure length of two days.)

Supporters agree that the route presents challenges but not any greater than those which exist on the Seward Highway which has 150 chutes or twice as many per mile as the LCH. Monitoring and managing avalanches is a normal part of highway maintenance in Alaska. Lynn Canal Highway topography is nothing new, and the State has budgeted \$20 million for snow sheds along the route.

Currently, because of infrequent and unreliable ferry service, we can't travel in northern Lynn Canal 90 days of every winter. On the days the road might close for avalanche control, the same ferry assigned to Katzeihin seven days a week would be redeployed to transport people around the slide areas. There would be no interruption in service.

The benefit to the environment is that automobiles using a highway will consume significantly less fossil fuel than the ferry system uses now. The "fast ferry" Fairweather burns a staggering 2,100 gallons of fuel to transport a maximum of 35 cars from Juneau to Skagway. Those same 35 cars could drive the Lynn Canal Highway to Katzeihin and burn less than 200 gallons of gasoline.

Juneau Access has been subjected to 20 years of political manipulation and environmental protests. Because the project has merit, it has survived the process while its opposition has become less honest and more desperate. When finally built, the Lynn Canal Highway will offer one of the most beautiful drives in the world. It will be a safe, scenic, reliable and cost-effective testament to the power of persistence, common sense and true progress. That is worth fighting for, and it is within reach. 

Sandy Williams' career spanned 30 years with the Alaska Department of Transportation. During his tenure he held the positions of chief design engineer, state maintenance engineer and SE Regional Engineer for eight years. Sandy lives in Douglas and enjoys gardening and travel, including trips to Whitehorse for cross-country skiing.

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