

My Turn: 2B or not 2B

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FOR THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

2B or not 2B, that is the question asked during the Alaska Department of Transportation's public meeting Tuesday on the supplemental Environmental Impact Statement regarding "The Road."

It references DOT's preferred alternative 2B, which proposes a road up the east side of Lynn Canal connecting Juneau to Haines and Skagway with shuttle ferries. Other alternatives were discussed, but the only other one besides 2B seriously supported in later testimony was the "no action" alternative (in other words, don't build a road).

Testimony was fervent on both sides, and people were respectful and listened carefully. However, I would hazard a guess that most people there had already made up their minds one way or another, and testimony given was unlikely to change that.

DOT has done a great job laying out the various alternatives and explaining each one. The supporting materials are voluminous and consist of many appendices, charts and tables. Despite the wealth of facts, I doubt very many people will spend the time to review them.

Because of this, I think a fair number of people in Juneau who perhaps were unable to spend an afternoon and evening participating in this event could be influenced by a number of misconceptions about this project. One of those misconceptions relates to the benefits for Lynn Canal residents.

But first, a little background on where I am coming from.

I was born and raised in Juneau and witnessed the arrival of the first mainline ferry, the Malaspina, in 1963. It was a great occasion welcomed by all. For those of you interested in a bit of trivia, that ship cost around \$4 million to build.

Obviously, a lot has happened since then. While the ferry system will always remain an integral part of the transportation system in Southeast Alaska and other parts of the state, under its current model the marine highway has suffered from declining ridership and ballooning subsidies, as well as schedule reductions and higher fares, effectively depressing demand.

The old model of ocean-going mainliners with expensive crew requirements and long hauls won't work anymore in Southeast Alaska. The cost to replace the aging Malaspina and the other, older mainliners is \$300 million each, and their ongoing maintenance requirements, declining reliability and high operating costs will continue to be a drag on the fleet.

Smaller, shorter-haul day boats connecting roads are the only way we'll be able to stem the growth of the subsidies required to keep these vessels afloat. That is what Alternative 2B proposes to do in Lynn Canal.

In the 1990s, the general fund subsidy was in the \$50 million range. More recently, the subsidy reached \$120 million and will only increase unless steps are taken to curb it. To put that in perspective, the amount subsidizing all our ferries is \$100 million more than it costs the state to maintain our entire statewide road system, despite the fact that ferries account for less than 1 percent of the vehicle miles driven in Alaska.

This lopsided equation will eventually force deeper scheduling cuts along with higher fares, which will further discourage travel and make the system even more unprofitable.

A roundtrip ferry ticket, with vehicle, for a family of four between Juneau and Haines is now approaching \$400. That is simply not affordable for many working families and seniors living on fixed incomes. Furthermore, that fare only covers about one-third of the actual cost of the trip. The state is picking up the rest of tab. It is simply not realistic to expect this to continue when an option to improve capacity while reducing fares and subsidies is available.

Alternative 2B is this option. Its benefits are straightforward. It will reduce out-of-pocket travel expense for a family of four to less than \$100 — a 75 percent decrease — and lower the state's subsidy per vehicle by a similar amount while increasing capacity by a factor of 10.

Over the next several weeks, I will examine some of the other misconceptions about this project addressing what seem to be the main concerns of its opponents. Those are project cost, safety and the environment.

Meanwhile, for those of you so inclined, please visit the DOT project website at dot.alaska.gov/sereg/projects/juneau_access/index.shtml to get more detailed information.

- Win Gruening retired as the senior vice president in charge of business banking for Key Bank in 2012. He was born and raised in Juneau and graduated from the U.S. Air Force Academy in 1970. He is active in community affairs as a 30-plus year member of Juneau Downtown Rotary Club and has been involved in various local and statewide organizations.