

## **Built With Steel, Perhaps, but Greased With Pork**

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By TIMOTHY EGAN

KETCHIKAN, Alaska, April 8 - Even by the standards of Alaska, the land where schemes and dreams come for new life, two bridges approved under the national highway bill passed by the House last week are monuments to the imagination.

One, here in Ketchikan, would be among the biggest in the United States: a mile long, with a top clearance of 200 feet from the water - 80 feet higher than the Brooklyn Bridge and just 20 feet short of the Golden Gate Bridge. It would connect this economically depressed, rain-soaked town of 7,845 people to an island that has about 50 residents and the area's airport, which offers six flights a day (a few more in summer). It could cost about \$200 million.

The other bridge would span an inlet for nearly two miles to tie Anchorage to a port that has a single regular tenant and almost no homes or businesses. It would cost up to \$2 billion.

These "bridges to nowhere," as critics have dubbed the two costliest of the high-priority projects in the six-year, \$275 billion House bill, are one reason Republicans are fighting among themselves in shaping the nation's transportation spending.

President Bush has threatened to use his first veto against any measure that emerges from a House-Senate conference with a cost of more than \$256 billion. (The Senate version, passed in February, calls for \$318 billion and includes neither of the projects, though their champion on Capitol Hill voices certainty that they will be added in conference.) Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, has described the legislation as so laden with pork as to betray the party's principles.

But if this is pork, the Republican behind the House bill says bring it on, with extra fat. Representative Don Young, Alaska's lone member of the House, where he is chairman of

the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, is already known as Mr. Concrete but would like to wear another title as well.

"I'd like to be a little oinker, myself," Mr. Young told a Republican lunch crowd here, taking mock offense at the suggestion that Ted Stevens, the Alaska Republican who is chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, directs more pork to their state than he does. "If he's the chief porker, I'm upset."

When asked why a town with one main road, a dwindling population and virtually nowhere to drive to needs a bridge to rival the world's great spans, people here inevitably respond with two words: Don Young. Mr. Young, mindful that the highway bill comes up for renewal only once every six years or so, and that the House Republican Conference imposes three-term limits on committee chairmanships, says the opportunity to pour so many federal dollars into his home state comes once in a lifetime, and should be seized.

"If you don't do it now, when are you going to do it?" he said at the luncheon. "This is the time to take advantage of the position I'm in, along with Senator Stevens."

He said he would support an increase in the federal tax on gasoline - a "user fee," he called it - to pay for even more projects than were included in the newly passed bill.

People here in Ketchikan, in far southeastern Alaska off the coast of British Columbia, are grateful for Mr. Young's efforts, and they can certainly use the 600 or so jobs that a vast government works project would bring. A veneer mill, supported by \$17 million in federal aid, lies empty and rusting, in search of an owner. The town's biggest job provider, a pulp mill, shut down in 1997.

But as a transportation solution, the Ketchikan bridge is seen as something of a joke. It would replace a five-minute ferry crossing.

"Everyone knows it's just a boondoggle that we're getting because we have a powerful congressman," said Mike Sallee, 57, whose mother homesteaded here and who now runs a small timber operation. "That ferry of ours has been pretty darn reliable."

In public hearings on the bridge plan, officials heard few complaints about the ferry service. The ferry crosses every half-hour in winter and every 15 minutes in summer, when there are two boats available and a third on call. The crossing one day this week, from the time a visitor picked up his bags at the airport to his reaching town, took less than 10 minutes - and that included a wait for the ferry to arrive and dock at the island.

The Gravina Island Access Bridge, as the project is called, has been given a Golden Fleece award by Taxpayers for Common Sense, a budget watchdog based in Washington.

"It's a gold-plated bridge to nowhere," said Keith Ashdown, a spokesman for the group. "At a time when we have bridges and roads crumbling around the United States, and traffic congestion worse than ever, why build a \$200 million project that will serve only a few hundred people?"

Mr. Young, whose bill has broad bipartisan support, speaks with passion of how traffic congestion has robbed the average American of 68 hours a year in lost time. But he says taking care of Alaska is just as important.

"If I had not done fairly well for our state," he said, "I'd be ashamed of myself."

As for the merits of the Ketchikan proposal, he said, "It's a bridge to somewhere." That somewhere is an island with a few miles of dirt roads, an unlogged sliver of the nation's biggest national forest. Mr. Young hopes the bridge will spur development in a part of Alaska where, though rain is measured by the foot (an average of more than 13 feet a year), cruise ships bring nearly a million tourists annually.

The nation's highway statute gets its money from a trust fund financed by the 18.4-cent-a-gallon federal tax that Americans pay on gasoline. Every time the legislation is renewed, lawmakers load it with special projects for their districts, called earmarks. Alaskans get nearly \$7 back for every dollar they put into the fund.

In all, the current House bill would give Alaska \$540 million in earmarks, including down payments of \$120

million for the Ketchikan bridge and \$200 million for the one at Anchorage. Those two costs alone are more than the total for earmarked projects in all of 41 other states, according to an analysis by Taxpayers for Common Sense.

Mr. Young said Alaska had been late to the federal table - it did not join the Union until 1959 - and needed to play catch-up. With his position as chairman of the House transportation committee, and with Mr. Stevens driving appropriations in the Senate, the state can muscle through most of the road projects it dreams up, he said.

"It's not a good way to legislate, although I got a lot of stuff in it," Mr. Young told The Anchorage Daily News in December. "I mean I stuffed it like a turkey."

The bridge in Anchorage would cross Knik Arm, which is clogged by ice blocks the size of cars for much of the year, and connect the city to an undeveloped area around Port MacKenzie. In their proposal, state officials said it was needed for domestic security and to "coordinate operations" between the Port of Anchorage and the MacKenzie port, which has only one permanent tenant. Promoters of the bridge now say it is needed to stimulate housing and commercial development as well.

Here in Ketchikan, a simple bridge to the north of the one now envisioned would have spanned a gap of only a quarter-mile between the airport and town, and at only a fraction of the cost. But it was judged too close to the airport for pilot safety.

Another idea was a bridge with a clearance of 120 feet rather than the 200 now planned. But that would have forced cruise ships, the only growth industry in town, to take a different approach to port. After cruise lines threatened to cut some dockings, the most expensive design offered became the plan of choice.

It calls for a span that will be longer than the George Washington Bridge, over the Hudson River, and will connect to Gravina Island through a middle island. Builders will be cutting into the flank of a mountain to anchor it.

Yet the bridge may make for a longer trip to the airport, people here say. Anyone driving from Ketchikan to catch a

plane will have to head south of town, move past a main drag frequently clogged with tourists, ascend a mountain, cross the mile-long bridge westbound, then circle north around the back of Gravina Island to reach the airport. In addition, the airport will have to build a parking structure, at an estimated cost of \$11 million.

"The funny thing, when that big bridge is done, it will take more time to get to the airport than it does now on our little ferry," said Dale Collins, a mariner who heads the ship pilots association here. "But it sure will be big. It's unbelievable, the size of that bridge."

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