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Fix failing bridges and roads before building new ones

COMPASS: Points of view from the community

Author: LOIS EPSTEIN

Following the Minneapolis bridge collapse on Aug. 1 that killed 13 and injured dozens, it's natural to wonder about the integrity of Alaska's bridges and other infrastructure.

According to the American Society of Civil Engineers' 2005 report card on Alaska, the state's transportation infrastructure is not in good shape: 30 percent of Alaska's bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete and 33 percent of the state's major roads are in poor or mediocre condition. ASCE notes that bad roads in Alaska cost motorists \$102 million each year in extra repair and operating costs, or \$212 each year per driver.

The Palin Administration faces an expensive but important task -- to maintain the state's transportation infrastructure at a time of decreasing federal funding. Alaska currently relies on federal funding more than any other state. This year, 70 percent of our \$810 million capital budget for transportation comes from federal dollars. Our share of the Highway Trust Fund -- the largest federal source of road money in Alaska -- likely will be reduced by as much as 25 percent beginning in 2009, according to the state department of transportation.

That will make a bad situation in Alaska worse. Prospects for a modest federal gas tax increase to fund bridge and road maintenance as a result of the Minneapolis bridge collapse,

supported in an Anchorage Daily News editorial on August 13, are uncertain at best.

It's not enough to fund maintenance of existing transportation infrastructure in Alaska, however. The state also needs to spend money to upgrade roads and intersections that pose safety hazards, especially in the fast-growing Mat-Su Borough.

Alaska also needs to fix road culverts that fail to allow fish passage, especially in the Kenai Peninsula Borough, where more salmon spawning means more commercial and sport-fishing revenue. (Coal Creek -- a tributary of the Kasilof River -- is one example.) Unfortunately, DOT budget limitations constrain the number of safety and fish and wildlife habitat upgrades currently possible.

Given the high costs of proper maintenance, it's obvious that the state should carefully scrutinize new transportation projects. Gravina Bridge near Ketchikan will cost over \$200 million; DOT still has this project on its books. The Juneau Road and Ferry project will cost over \$300 million, not including design challenges discovered last summer. The Knik Arm Bridge will cost over \$1 billion including Phases 1 and 2 (some of which will be covered by private investors). These controversial projects, all of questionable benefit and potentially subject to large cost overruns, are so expensive that the rest of the state's transportation infrastructure undoubtedly will suffer if any of them goes forward.

As an engineer, I can understand why DOT engineers like to build new transportation projects. New projects present interesting design and construction challenges. Nevertheless, it's clear to me that the best policy for the state right now is to "fix it first" rather than to build expensive new controversial projects.

Otherwise, there is a chance that one or more state bridges

could suffer the fate of the Minneapolis bridge. Building new, non-essential yet costly bridge and road mega-projects is not a wise use of Alaska's limited -- and declining -- transportation dollars.

Lois N. Epstein is an engineer and director of Alaska Transportation Priorities Project in Anchorage.