

Downtown crossing opposed

by Annette Taylor
Times Business Writer

There's no doubt in Bobby Parker's mind that the life expectancy of a Knik Arm bridge crossing Downtown would be only two years.

In his 40 years at sea, "I never saw a bridge that a ship couldn't knock down," Parker testified Wednesday night at a public hearing on the environmental effects of building a bridge across Knik Arm to link Anchorage and Point MacKenzie.

The two routing options under consideration are a Downtown access at Third Avenue and L and I streets or an Elmendorf Air Force Base access to the Glenn Highway.

The joint hearing before the state Department of Transportation and Public Facilities and the Anchorage Planning and Zoning Commission was held at the Egan Civic & Convention Center.

Most of the opposition Wednesday night was not to the bridge itself but to the Downtown

route because of navigational hazards. A bridge near the Port of Anchorage would pose to both commercial and recreational vessels, a third of those testifying said.

If a fuel tanker struck the bridge while trying to maneuver through ice to the Anchorage port and caught fire, Parker said, "Well, all you could do is get some weenies."

And if ships couldn't get into the port because of an accident

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into account the state's plans, now under way, to widen the Glenn Highway to six lanes to Eagle River and from there widening the road to four lanes to the Parks Highway. No cost estimates were available.

Another alternative calls for widening the Glenn Highway to six lanes all the way to the Parks Highway and widening that road to four lanes to Wasilla. The estimated cost is \$57 million.

A third alternative is buying three Hovercrafts to ferry people and vehicles between Point MacKenzie and Anchorage. The estimated cost is \$227 million.

The Hovercraft option drew some support Wednesday as a more reasonable place to start. Stuart Hall said other major cities, including San Francisco, didn't build their famous bridges until after ferry operations could no longer handle all of the traffic.

Most testified that some kind

of crossing was needed to open up land for development, which possibly would reduce land prices in Anchorage. Milburn Tucker, a Point MacKenzie dairy farmer speaking for most dairy operators in that area, also noted that a bridge was critical in keeping a lid on product prices.

But several of those testifying also were worried about increasing carbon monoxide levels and displacing traffic congestion to other areas of town.

"What does a 20-percent increase on the I-L street couplet really mean?" Sandra Wicks said. "What does that mean in the number of lanes we might have to add or what it will do to the greenbelt at Westchester Lagoon?"

Foremost in the minds of many attending the hearing Wednesday was how much a Knik Arm bridge would cost and where would the money come

from.

A few people warned that politicians may be pushing the Knik Arm crossing project simply because money burns holes in their pockets. If they think they have the money — whether it be state or federal — "they want to spend it," Wicks said.

How the state would finance a bridge is under study.

The Planning and Zoning Commission will meet again at 7:30 p.m. Oct. 17 at 4600 DeBarr Road.

The Resource Development Council's Knik Army study team has scheduled 26 meetings in the next three weeks also to look at the economic feasibility of the bridge and possible impacts.

The team's draft report will be presented to the council's executive committee Oct. 17. The final report will be released to the public Oct. 22.

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Spanning Knik Arm

A TEAM from the state Department of Transportation and Public Facilities has the job of planning a bridge across Knik Arm to connect Anchorage and the Matanuska Valley.

It has put together lengthy feasibility studies, done extensive work on environmental impact, considered alternative locations for the Anchorage end of the bridge and has even taken some core samples from the bed of the arm.

Some design work also has been done, and drawings are available for all to see.

That's fine and dandy. But some turbulent days are ahead.

OBJECTORS WILL shoot at the project from all directions, as was the case at the public hearing here Wednesday night. The detractors focused on the problems a bridge could cause to shipping at the Anchorage port and predicted if the span began in Downtown Anchorage it would be knocked down by a boat within the first two years.

There's more to the down side. Cost estimates are in the neighborhood of \$550 million and the source of those megabucks has not been pinpointed. It's up to the legislature to agree on how to finance the crossing.

It would be possible to dig into the state treasury and pay for the bridge with cash, but that could put other capital projects on the back

burner. Because a Knik crossing would be of regional, rather than statewide, benefit, legislators from other parts of the state might not look too kindly on shorting their own constituents in favor of an expensive Southcentral bridge.

The legislature has given the state the authority to finance and operate public toll facilities, which could include the bridge. But even the biggest dreamers concede it is unlikely that the amount of traffic using it in the first few years would bring in sufficient revenue.

CONCEDING these obstacles, there are reasons to hope the bridge will be built.

Thousands of jobs would be created during the construction. The link would relieve some of the traffic congestion on existing highways to the valley.

Anchorage is growing by 1,000 new residents a month and it will soon run out of room. The land across the arm is the most likely prospect for expansion. Use of that land for homes and businesses would increase the tax base of the valley.

A crossing that would link Anchorage and MacKenzie Point has been talked about for more than a quarter of a century and the legislature has flirted with funding it for years. The work of the enthusiastic team from DOT would indicate the state is finally taking the project seriously.

Written comments on the Knik Arm Crossing may still be submitted to Jerry Hamel at the Department of Transportation. The deadline for written comments is Oct. 22.

The location was rejected earlier by the consulting team, partially because a suspension bridge in that area would encroach on the Elmen-

board president Millett Keller, cited the high cost of the project. "Both crossings, I think, are infeasible," Keller said. "I was confident that they would sink under their own weight, until 1979 (when North Slope oil revenues started rolling in). Then all of a sudden they became feasible, because feasibility was determined by the availability of funds, not necessarily whether the project makes sense or not."

Keller said he was concerned that "when the level of political shouting increases, the chances of making a more terrible public policy decision also increases." Others in the crowd thought the potential benefits of a bridge would more than outweigh the costs. Pat Davis said he was disappointed with all the negativity talk. Anchorage has no bridge, where to grow but across the

bridge, like former school

mat-su news

Assembly OKs council

PALMER — The Matanuska-Susitna Assembly Tuesday approved a new community council covering the central Palmer-Wasilla Highway area. Under boundaries approved, the South Lakes Community Council covers an area from Seward Meridian Road to just west of Trunk Road, from the shores of Finger, Cottonwood and Mud lakes to the Parks Highway. The new council — initiated by residents of several subdivisions and homeowners' associations — will be the fifth community council in the borough. Residents in the Butte and Big Lake areas are also talking about forming community councils, according to borough officials. The recognized advisory councils receive and comment on municipal issues. Interest in forming councils has been rising lately, said Borough Manager Gary Thurlow. "It's very timely because there are so many land use

issues coming to the fore at this time," he said.

Knik crossing hearings set

WASILLA — Two public hearings on the final environmental report analyzing the Knik Arm Crossing have been set in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. The first is 7:30 p.m. today at Wasilla High School. The second will be 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at Houston City Hall. State planners are expected to give a brief presentation on the study and then open the meetings to public comment. The state is considering two crossing sites: a \$747 million bridge at downtown Anchorage and a \$547 bridge at Elmendorf Air Force Base. Once across the water, both routes would lead to Houston. Written comments on the study can be submitted through Oct. 22.

From Daily News staff reports

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Valley residents fear bridge may sacrifice welfare

by Al Campbell
Times Valley Bureau

Wasilla — The proposed Knik Arm crossing took a battering Thursday from a majority of speakers at a public hearing into possible impact at "the other end" of the multi-million-dollar span.

That's "this end" for the people of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. And with few exceptions Thursday they expressed fears that their welfare was in danger of being sacrificed for the convenience of Anchorage commuters.

Those commuters, they say, would cost existing Mat-Su taxpayers out-of-pocket cash in additional taxes, while providing little overall benefit to the 34,000 people al-

ready living in the borough.

Other speakers at the hearing called for upgrading of the existing Parks-Glenn highways commuter routes to be upgraded before any new crossing is established.

But the essence of the objections came from Wasilla lawyer Noel Kopperud, who called on Mat-Su residents to "consider your own identity," rather than, as he put it, "providing an evening residence for Anchorage."

Kopperud pointed to frequent references in pro-crossing arguments to easing the problems of overcrowding and high property costs in the Anchorage Bowl.

He suggested the state government

should set priorities — with a crossing low on the list — for alleviating dangerous and inconvenient existing traffic problems in the Valley.

Kopperud said the military could be approached to relocate from some of their thousands of acres in suburban Anchorage, thus freeing land for immediate growth in the area.

About 100 people attended the hearing here, and fewer than a dozen spoke. One was David Ring, a landowner at Point MacKenzie and frequent public supporter of the crossing.

Ring said there was an estimated \$1 billion in gravel which could be extracted and sold from Point MacKenzie to help

offset the estimated \$500 million to \$700 million cost of the crossing.

Ring objected to charges that he and other private speculators would be the sole beneficiaries of the span. He said only 10 percent of the 65,000 acres in Point MacKenzie was in private hands, and the rest of the land, if sold, would pump up government coffers.

But Mike Bromson countered that his estimates showed the owner of a typical \$100,000 home now in this area would pay up to \$177 per year in additional taxes to provide services to new residents who would locate in the borough if a bridge were built.

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Knik Arm crossing proposal

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The increased taxes would be needed to make up an estimated "shortfall" of up to \$9 million a year in Mat-Su Borough revenues.

Consultants acknowledge that shortfall would occur, as the local government there struggled to provide services for new commuters, who would bring homes and families — but no jobs — to the area.

In the past, borough officials have estimated it costs about \$1,500 in local taxes to educate one child in Mat-Su schools, and a typical family has more than one school-aged child.

That typical family pays less than \$1,000 in property taxes

under current mill rates, leading to an existing shortfall which crossing critics say would worsen with the added population.

Bromson asked for an independent study of that impact before plans for the Knik crossing are pursued. He said he did not want the Mat-Su Borough government to conduct the study, as the borough had a "vested interest" in the crossing.

Robert Johnson said he favored the crossing because he now pays \$159 per month in borough taxes, and "gets nothing" in return from the Mat-Su government.

Mat-Su officials are on record as favoring some form of Knik Arm route, which they say will stimulate industrial development

as well as residential population growth.

But borough officials, too, have expressed concern in the past over the apparent emphasis on benefits to Anchorage from the proposed span.

Some say they have perceived an almost colonial attitude by Anchorage factions promoting the crossing, without, they say, any consideration for the local government and population already in place here.

Palmer businessman Ben Wattum said the state should be working on a plan now to ease dangerous congestion on the Parks and Glenn highways for the thousands of commuters now traveling between Anchorage and Valley points.

"If you don't," he said, "some of you in this room are going to be dead."

Palmer-area farmer Jay Dearborn said if the so-called "no-crossing option" were pursued by upgrading the existing highway system, some consideration should be given to improving major highway intersections to speed traffic and increase safety factors in commuting.

And Pierre Strong said the crossing would not cut off any distance for commuters except for those traveling to Houston, the proposed northern terminus of the crossing off-ramp.

Planners have acknowledged that commuting time from Wasilla to Anchorage would be about the same with a new crossing, or on the existing highway routes.

Kn timer crossing at downtown location rapped by marine officials

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agreed with concerns that a downtown bridge might lead to a winter closing of the port. "If Sea-Land and TOTE had to pull out of Anchorage," Waters said, "you people would run out of toilet paper in a week."

Port director Jones was clearly taking the possibility of a winter shutdown seriously. "Once vessel master: had failed to dock at Anchorage a time or two," said Jones, "the major shipping companies would seek alternatives for serving Anchorage." This, he said, would make the city's \$15 million port "virtually obsolete."

Even aside from downtown crossing controversy, the testimony at the hearing was spirited. Several opponents of the bridge, like former school