

Coalition emerges to fight Knik Arm bridge

ALTERNATIVES: Groups say ferry, commuter train easier on Inlet, budget.

By ROSEMARY SHINOHARA
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A coalition of environmental and public interest groups Monday objected to building a bridge across Knik Arm, proposing alternatives such as ferry service and a commuter rail between Mat-Su and Anchorage.

Their idea, in a letter to the Federal Highway Administration and the Knik Arm Bridge and Toll Authority, comes on the eve of public presentations today and Wednesday on the status of federal studies for the proposed bridge.

The highway administration is on the verge of determining what alternatives to continue studying, said Edrie Vinson, federal environmental project manager.

The coalition letter said the groups are interested in keeping Government Hill and other neighborhoods intact. One alternative route discussed for the bridge's connection to Anchorage would cut across Government Hill.

Instead of the bridge, the coalition urged that the federal government and the bridge authority consider these ideas: regular car ferry service between Point MacKenzie and Anchorage; an investment in commuter rail; incentives for car and van pools between the Valley and Anchorage; and expanded bus service and street cars for the state's largest city.

Vinson said the highway administration also doesn't want to cut a neighborhood in half.

"We're equally concerned about Government Hill," she said.

As for the four alternatives, she said the bridge planners have considered all the options mentioned except street cars in Anchorage.

"I think it takes more than any one of these, or all four together," to meet the transportation needs between the Valley and Anchorage, Vinson said.

The groups in the coalition include the Alaska Center for the Environment, Alaska Conservation Alliance, Alaska Public Interest Research Group, Alaska Transportation Priorities Project, Alaska Wildlife Alliance, Cook Inlet Keeper and the Sierra Club Alaska Regional Office.

Each group has a slightly different concern, said Lois Epstein of Cook Inlet Keeper, an organization with the mission of protecting the Cook Inlet watershed.

"This issue is of concern to us largely because of what it would mean in terms of sprawl development, the belugas and the salmon," Epstein said. "The belugas are now facing Port of Anchorage expansion, potentially lots more traffic through Port MacKenzie, plus this bridge. It's a real question about whether they'll be able to survive."

The Alaska Public Interest Research Group is focused on the proposed project cost, estimated at \$600 million.

"Mainly we got involved because we think it's a bad way to spend the transportation money that's coming up here," said Steve Cleary, AkPIRG director.

Emily Ferry represents a group funded by a grant from the Alaska Conservation Foundation just to study and comment on the proposed bridge, the Transportation Priorities Project.

"In the region, we see there are a lot of improvements close to happening, rather than a speculative, far-off bridge," she said. For example, she said, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough is progressing on a ferry between Anchorage and Point MacKenzie. And the Alaska Railroad is straightening tracks between Anchorage and Wasilla, which would make a commuter rail more likely, she said.

The Knik Arm Bridge and Toll Authority is a group appointed by Gov. Frank Murkowski to shepherd the proposed bridge along, including figuring out financing.

Darryl Jordan, deputy director of the authority, said it's great that the coalition is suggesting alternatives in a timely way. Projects get into trouble later if they don't look all the ideas up front, he said.

"We're very happy they're doing this in advance of the project."

Daily News reporter Rosemary Shinohara can be reached at rshinohara@adn.com or 257-4340.

public meeting

THE KNIK ARM BRIDGE AND TOLL AUTHORITY has scheduled two public meetings this week in Wasilla and Anchorage to discuss the latest concepts for the proposed crossing. The Wasilla meeting will be from 6 to 8:30 tonight at the Multi-Use Sports Complex, 1001 S. Mack Drive. The Anchorage meeting will be from 5 to 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Egan Civic & Convention Center, 555 W. Fifth Ave. To comment on the project, go to www.knikarmbridge.com

