

Should John Q. Public cross the Yukon River bridge?

**Governor
Hammond says
"yes" ... by bus**

Should the pipeline haul road be opened for public use?

Or should its use continue to be strictly tied to supply and maintenance of the trans-Alaska oil pipeline?

Alaska Governor Jay Hammond today announced that his administration plans to open the Haul Road to public use, but not to travel by private automobiles. Rather, Hammond proposes that tourists wishing to see the country north of the Yukon could do so by utilizing a tour bus system, financed by the private sector.

In addition, Hammond called for continued industrial use of the road in connection with oil and gas pipeline activities.

Although Hammond's Haul Road plan will no doubt be encouraging to the northern communities that stand to lose elements of their rural character, the proposal could still be modified to permit public automobile access under pressure from a highly mobile, vocal public who cast long envious looks at the expansive country north of the Yukon River Bridge.

Hammond and the Alaska Legislature are faced with striking a balance in Haul Road usage between northern resource development and protection of the environment and traditional Native lifestyles. However, Native and other rural spokesmen have hammered

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away again and again at the theme that the impact of public use of the road would be too great to permit any balance, that the effect on bush communities all across the North Slope and south of the Brooks Range could never be adequately controlled to allow subsistence hunting and fishing to continue as the people presently do.

The haul road and the adjacent pipeline itself form the northern medulla of the Utility Corridor, land withdrawn to give the line a home of its own between Valdez and Prudhoe Bay. The northern portion of the corridor extends about 336 miles between Washington Creek (110 miles south of the Yukon River) and the Arctic foothills of the Brooks Range.

It has been a long time since a public highway poked its way into the Alaskan bush. Most Alaskan highway dollars have been put to use maintaining existing highways and very local road projects.

The question that lurks behind the possible opening of the Haul Road is: would such action open the floodgates of highway access to the bush that have been held tightly shut by reluctant rural Alaskans against public opinion that has had nothing to rally around? Could the Haul Road issue provide urban Alaskans and resource developers a banner to carry in overwhelming rural objections to all bush highways?

The Haul Road will be taken over by the State of Alaska from Alyeska Pipeline Service Co. late this year, when it has been brought up to secondary highway standards. At that time, the state will control the 200-foot right-of-way that holds the road itself; the Bureau of Land Management will retain control over the Utility Corridor lands outside the right-of-way.

Both the state and the BLM have prepared reports that tend to favor public

use of the Haul Road, under tight government control. Both envision further industrial use of the road, for mineral development as well as heavy use by the public for outdoor recreation. Both are heavily involved in planning processes that seek to prevent a road opening from becoming an environmental disaster.

The BLM report contemplates the construction of spur roads from the Haul Road for mineral development and the development of public camping and other visitor facilities.

The state, at this point, is concerned whether the road can pay for itself, at a time when state revenues are declining.

Among the strongest opponents of public use of the Haul Road are environmental groups. George Matz, director of the Fairbanks Environmental Center, recently wrote Gov. Hammond:

"With this letter, the Center wants to reaffirm its position that the Haul Road be used only for pipeline construction and maintenance. This was the purpose for which it was built and is the only purpose it should serve."

In December the North Slope Borough Assembly, which has zoning powers over the bulk of the land that might be impacted by public use of the Haul Road, passed a resolution setting forth its view of such action, a part of which is excerpted below:

"Opening the Haul Road presents a clear and present danger to wildlife in the area and to its natural sources of food in need of particular attention by the residents of this area through their local Borough government.

"Opening the road will encourage further non-traditional community development inconsistent with the best interests of the residents that will demand costly new services and cause waste disposal and pollution problems."

The Assembly resolved

that the State of Alaska should continue its present policy of only allowing industrial use of the road, that industrial users, after the state assumes control of the road, should continue to bear the brunt of maintenance costs, and that in the event the state opts to open the road for public use before the state considers any permanent Haul Road policy, that other means of linking North Slope communities with the outside world be considered. The Assembly asserted that the State should fund the improvement of local transportation systems, such as roads between airports and communities, before committing state dollars to Haul Road activities.

The North Slope Borough is also seeking State recognition of borough zoning powers in the event that those powers are threatened indirectly by the activities of the multitude of landowners along the route of the Haul Road.

Other North Slope and Brooks Range communities have not exactly been silent on the Haul Road issue. In 1976, the Alaska Growth Policy Council held a series of community meetings in Barrow, Anaktuvuk Pass, Fairbanks, Evansville/Bettles, Alatna and Allakaket. The Council prepared summaries of the meetings which were sent to the towns for their information. A large turnout in Anaktuvuk Pass, a community which has steadfastly fought expanded road access to the Alaskan Arctic, produced the following consensus, reported by Meeting Coordinator Jack Osteen:

"The benefits that might accrue to State economy through tourism are not great enough to trade-off for the isolation, small and sparse population and adequate game that you value in your lifestyle. Your comments included feelings that if the Haul Road were available to tourists that there would be little that could be

done to control damage to land and game—damage which you seemed to feel would be inevitable.

"Subsistence hunting is the major issue regarding the Haul Road—you feel that the continuance of successful subsistence hunting would be crucially threatened by public access to the road. You seemed to feel that loss of game would be the steady result of public use of the road."

Osteen reported to the people of Alatna and Allakaket the impressions the Growth Policy Council received from that meeting:

"You felt that if the road were used even just for mining and petroleum exploration/development, a network of other roads would emerge, and you saw this as undesirable.

"You felt that if the road were open to the public any hunting controls would be unenforceable—and you see subsistence hunting and fishing as one of the most threatened aspects of your lifestyle if the road were opened.

"Regarding tourism, you had serious doubts that most tourists would respect the wildlife and the wilderness, saying that current traffic has been flagrantly disrespectful of the land and game."

In late November last year, the village corporation for the Evansville/Bettles area tersely informed the Bureau of Land Management that it was not interested in a spur road from Prospect Creek, a camp along the pipeline route, to Bettles Field.

"We have issued resolutions on this matter and reaffirm our stand against the spur road," according to Rhoda Musser of Evansville, Inc.

Just this week, the Tundra Times spoke with Cheryl Mayo, president of Din-Yea Corp., village corporation for Stevens Village, a town of about 68 people along the Yukon River, where the Haul Road begins. Mayo briefly summarized the feeling of Stevens people about the possible

opening of the Haul Road:

"They would rather see it closed and not open to the public. Mostly because of the closeness to the village. They're afraid they'll branch off and go to Stevens, they just don't feel they need it."

Mayo said her people, like other communities that would be affected by a Haul Road opening, fear the loss of hunting, trapping and fishing resources and are satisfied for the most part with commuting to points outside the village by air. She added that Stevens area is already being impacted by summer boat traffic on the Yukon.

So say the residents of the North country who will have to live with a Haul Road opening, should it come about.

Those Alaskans who advocate opening the road to public access argue that there is a larger state and national interest in providing access to the mineral and scenic resources north of the Yukon. They cite the possible boost to the state economy that would result from an expanded tourism industry, to say nothing of resource development revenues.

These interests are not uniformly ignorant of rural doubts about highway development, nor the reasons for such doubt. Advocates of opening and closing the road part ways in a very basic way. Some effort has been made by land planners to advance the idea of providing public access to the Haul Road and surrounding areas by way of buses or a railroad extension north from Fairbanks. However, open road advocates seem to discount these options as too restrictive or too costly.

As mentioned earlier, there is a larger question behind the option of opening the Haul Road to the motoring public: what effect would such a decision have on transportation planning for the rest of rural Alaska? Would a Haul Road opening mean that

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gone conclusions? Would highways to Barrow, Kotzebue, and Bethel were foregone conclusions? Would such a decision usher in a time when the people of rural Alaska slowly begin to lose the ability to say "no" to developments that eventually would erode those qualities of measured isolation and tight-knit community existence that make rural Alaska rural?