

# Dalton Highway maintenance is imperative

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One of the state's greatest legacies following construction of the oil pipeline is the Dalton Highway, formerly known as the Haul Road and named recently by the Legislature after James Dalton, an arctic pioneer. This \$750 million replacement-value asset is the land-link to the North that had long been the dream of many Alaskan prior to its construction in the early 1970's.

Since the construction of the pipeline, the road has had a checkered legislative history. Until recently there has been wide debate in the Legislature about whether the road should be maintained as a public highway or, essentially, simply a commercial route that supplies the oil fields at Prudhoe Bay. The Legislature recently determined, and the administration concurred in that determination, that the route would remain open along its entire link to commercial traffic and the southern half of the road would also be opened to the public for access to the Yukon River and the

Brooks Range.

As part of that legislative decision, a total of \$14 million was appropriated for road repair — money that was desperately needed for repair to the highway that has been the focal point of so much debate. Also, funds were appropriated to provide additional public safety along the high.

Deteriorating conditions on the highway came to a head recently in Fairbanks when nearly 700 truck drivers gathered to protest dangerous driving conditions. These drivers' livelihoods depend upon safe maintenance of the Dalton Highway. A panel of state officials, including legislators, the deputy commissioner of the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities and myself at the request of the governor, met with the union and non-union truck drivers.

The consensus of all the truckers and freight company managers that the state group met with is that the Dalton Highway is not safe. Potholes, ruts, soft shoulders, frost heaves, sink holes and washboard conditions are destroying vehicles and en-

dangering the lives and livelihoods of those drivers and companies that supply the immense oil field that is the mainstay of Alaska's present economy.

The highway has been treated too long as a stepchild of the state highway system. Despite the fact that the road receives more traffic than some other roads in the highway system, minimal effort was made to ensure that it was maintained adequately. Consequently, there needs to be a timely commitment of those funds that were approved in the last Legislature to stop the current erosion of quality and safety.

Commissioner Bob Ward of the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities has indicated that his agency is beginning to make those commitments. In response to the truckers, his department "did recently make some early repairs on the road, especially to areas that had deteriorated due to month-long rain storms. Agency employees are now assessing the road for areas most in need of repair and the best methods for effecting those repairs.

The department now has clear mandates from the administration and the legislature on what the future of the road will be. This year the Legislature backed that mandate with the allocation of \$14 million for upkeep of the road and future funds for other improvements are anticipated.

The issue of the haul road is not simply the fate of a handful of truck drivers although more than 600 commercial drivers use the haul road. Additionally, the road is a year-round supply link to the oil fields and suppliers and shippers in the railbelt area are dependent upon continued access to the fields.

The state has determined that the Dalton Highway will be

maintained to secondary road standards. That has not been the case in the past because of extensive debate on the future of the road and debate about what responsibilities should be assumed by the state for maintenance of the highway.

The simple fact is that a round trip on the road now takes twice as much time as it did when Alyeska maintained the road and the safety of commercial and recreational drivers is not as assured as it would have been in the past. We must ensure that our recent commitment to improve the condition of the road is met so that our access to one of the most important areas of the state — Prudhoe Bay — is not severed.