

Speech to PACCOM Expo

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By Representative Jeannette James

Remember the last time you were stopped at a railroad crossing gate ... Your first reaction was probably great annoyance, particularly if you were in a big hurry.

But think about it ... I'll bet you still looked for that train as it approached. And I'll go so far as to say that you probably felt a little, tiny thrill as the train went by. There's something about a train that seems to just force you to stop, look and listen.

I've always loved trains. And it's no secret that I'd love to see a railroad built to connect Alaska with the rest of North America ... which is the reason I'm speaking to you right now.

Not everyone in Alaska is as big a fan of trains as I am, though. Take Anchorage Daily News columnist Mike Doogan, for example. Mike's big problem with building a railroad to the Lower 48 is that it would be using, and I quote here, "the very best of 19th century technology."

I think Mike Doogan should get out a little more.

Just because railroads were visionary in the 19th century doesn't mean they won't be visionary in the 21st. Have you been in Salem, Oregon lately? The train station there is shiny-new and fully restored to its original grandeur. Seattle's King Street Station will be similarly restored. These are no tourist attractions, they're working train stations -- and they're plenty busy. Amtrak's new Cascades service connects Vancouver, B.C. with Eugene, Oregon three times a day. The lines' new Talgo trains, designed and partly manufactured in Spain, are sleek ... fast ... and packed with passengers. Commuters now move between Seattle and Tacoma on the brand-new Sounder ... double deck passenger cars with locomotives just as new and shiny as the California Zephyr was in 1936.

There's nothing 19th century about either of these trains. There's nothing 19th century about the Eurostar -- the high speed train which connects London and Paris through the Channel Tunnel in about the same time it would take by air, counting the time to and from the airport, for a little less money.

Trains are cutting edge. New locomotives use natural gas as fuel. Other new locomotives use gravity to generate electricity. Intermodal technology allows for rapid movement of cargo.

Railroads were cutting edge in the 1850s. And they're cutting edge in 2001. When the White Pass and Yukon Route was built in 1899, it was considered truly visionary. And it will be visionary when Alaska is finally connected with the rest of North America by rail a century or so later.

Relative to other forms of transportation, railroads are inexpensive, durable, effective and easy to build.

The footprint a railroad makes on the land and environment is small. But the impact a railroad makes on an economy is great. And that's another reason why I'm speaking to you here.

Lets look at Alaska, where railroads are limited compared to most of the rest of North America. Is it just coincidence that Alaska's economic heartland is called "The Railbelt?" Is it only coincidence that Anchorage -- and not Valdez -- is Alaska's largest city? Remember, for a second, that when the visionaries who decided to build the Alaska railroad, Valdez was the main Alaska port and what we now know as Anchorage was a tent city construction camp.

I represent North Pole, and the railroad's economic presence is certainly evident there every time a refinery employee cashes a paycheck. The same could be said for Healy or Usibelli, communities also in my district. Chances are you've watched those gold and blue Alaska Railroad engines haul rail car after rail car of coal or jet fuel.

I was at a committee hearing the other day, and the economist who was speaking made the off-hand comment that "Alaska didn't have an economy." People were kind of taken aback by that statement. ... But I knew exactly what he was talking about. We don't have an economy in Alaska ... we have a series of boom and bust cycles, and do you know the worst part of that? We aren't even the engineer that drives those booms and busts. Alaska's economy is *reactionary* instead of *actionary*. There ... I made up a new word!

This is why I am such a strong advocate of building this railroad. Over and over again we are told that Alaska must improve its infrastructure. Mining -- which historically has provided among the best-paying jobs this state can offer -- will remain limited to narrow belts around existing roads, ports or cities. A railroad from Eielson Air Force Base to the Canadian Border, however, passes within miles of some of the state's most promising and proven mineral reserves. Not only are the Tanana uplands rich in gold and silver, but there are proven deposits of copper, lead, zinc, tin, molybdenum and tungsten.

This rich geological belt extends across the border to the Yukon Territory, where mining now is in steep decline due to transportation issues. Still, mining is the No. 1 commercial activity in the territory.

Railroads provide mines with exactly the kind of transportation they need, because, once connected with the North American rail system, concentrates can be shipped to a smelter economically and efficiently. Manufactured goods, timber and agricultural products could be sent to market with similar efficiency. And I see a new role for Alaska's ports such as Anchorage. Freighters sailing between the West Coast and Asia pass right by Alaska. With a rail connection to the rest of North America, containerized goods from, or headed to, the Mid West or East Coast could transfer to rail right here, putting Alaskans to work in this transportation sector.

This summer I bought a new, digital camera. One of its features is a lens with an adjustable view. Push the button one way, and you get a wide view. Push it the other way and you get what I call a long view. I believe Alaska must take two looks at this railroad project: a broad view, and a long view. When I talk about benefits to resource industries, I'm taking the long view ... to a time when the railroad link is up and running.

Now let's look at the wide view.

The project I envision is more than simply iron tracks, ties and locomotives. I see a transportation and utility corridor. When we lay tracks, we must also lay fiber optic cable. I don't think you can have too much fiber optic connectivity. True, Alaska can export mineral concentrates. But Alaska can also export information ... vision ... expertise ... and ideas.

If we are going to have an economy in Alaska, we have to create wealth. To do this we sorely need to have transportation infrastructure, and this is the heart of the reason why I have been pressing this issue since 1993, when I began my service in the Alaska House of Representatives. A railroad connection to the rest of North America will mean incentive and opportunity for the private sector to invest in Alaska, thereby creating the roots of a real and stable economy.

I have learned that for each job in the basic economy, two and a half are created in the service sector. Service industry jobs cannot exist in a vacuum -- or in an economy that lacks long-term stability. To put it simply, If no wealth is created, then there's no one to pay for services.

In taking a broad view of the railroad I see great potential for tourism. I am convinced tourism will be a major user of this railroad ... particularly when you consider the trip itself will be the destination. In a week you could go from Fairbanks to New York and back. Imagine, you could watch the northern lights one day ... and the lights of Broadway a few days later.

I am fully aware that some of my contemporaries don't believe the railroad will ever be built, and I guess they wonder why I or other supporters of the project bother to put in the effort. ... Let me quote for them from a work of classic literature ... and I'll pose it in the form of a question ...

Just when did we as Alaskans decide to let "I Think I Can, I Think I Can, I Think I Can" be the end of the story?

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