

Healthy State Needs a Connection

By Representative Jeannette James

It's too bad we can't put potatoes in the pipeline.

Alaska's major export -- oil -- gets to market by pipeline and then tanker. Fish products get to market by air or barge. Timber products go south by water, and tourists -- at least most of them -- arrive in Alaska by ship or airplane.

I've lived in the Great Land for a long time, and I am more convinced than ever that Alaska's one primary problem is the lack of opportunity to create wealth. There is too little economic development and too few family-wage jobs.

This situation will not improve until Alaska's infrastructure improves. As long as our farmers, miners and entrepreneurs have no way to get their products and ideas to market, our economy will continue to stagnate, or remain subject to a too-familiar boom-and-bust cycle.

Existing transportation infrastructure works well where it is, and there are small breakthroughs. One example is the direct sale of high-end seafood products to restaurants and specialty markets in the Lower 48. Yet, except for our coastal seaports and major airports, Alaska remains economically isolated from North America's major markets. And that's why we need, not just a connection, but A Connection.

To grow in the 21st century, Alaska must have efficient, effective surface transportation to the population centers of North America. I am particularly dedicated to building a railroad from Alaska to Canada and the Lower 48 -- but I believe we need more than just two steel tracks. We need a gas pipeline. But we also need the increased bandwidth of a high-volume fiber optic cable. We need A Connection!

A quick look at a map of North America shows proposed rail and gas lines headed squarely toward Alberta, Canada -- and there's a logical tie between that province and Alaska. We are both the energy centers of North America, and that gives us common, rather than competing, interests.

Alberta and Alaska have great potential for hi-tech industry. Alberta is presently expanding broad-band internet connections to link all its communities, urban and rural -- and that makes a connection which includes fiber optic cable even more promising for Alaska.

Alaska and Alberta also form a natural connection in being home to our respective nations' most-popular National Parks. Alaska tourism presently flows more or less

north and south; A Connection, which includes both rail and improved air service, will allow for efficient and highly-marketable circulation of as many as a million visitors annually.

Alaska has plenty of room to grow as a market. To efficiently develop and export natural gas, a great deal of drilling equipment and supplies will be needed in the field, taking into consideration the fact that gas wells empty much faster than oil wells.

It's the beginning of the 21st century, and studies show our most productive generation -- Alaskans age 18-44 -- are leaving the state because there are better opportunities elsewhere. This is incredibly disappointing information, because Alaska is rich in resources ... and it's a great place to live!

Before we can create jobs for our high school, tech school and college graduates, we must begin to build an infrastructure that will connect Alaska with markets and suppliers. A gas pipeline is coming, and work is beginning on a missile defense shield.

This is a time of real promise. A bilateral commission to complete a feasibility study is close to being a reality. There is growing interest in Yukon and Western Canada.

There is no reason we cannot create jobs here at home for our children. A railroad to connect Alaska with the rest of North America will be a good foundation for our future. We need more; we need A Connection that could someday include not only rail, a gas pipeline and fiber optic cable, but electric interties, a water pipeline and whatever need might arise.

In the next month or so I will be discussing and promoting this connection at the Alaska State Chamber of Commerce meeting and at a meeting of the Northern Forum in Alberta. There's a lot to talk about -- for example, the bilateral commission to do a feasibility study of the railroad connection, as authorized in Senator Murkowski's Rails to Resources legislation.

In addition, I am planning to hold a meeting in Fairbanks in October to share information on this connection. I'm inviting all Alaskans to get on board! My office number in North Pole is 488 1546. Call me! And you can also check out my web site at www.repjames.org. It's being updated almost daily.