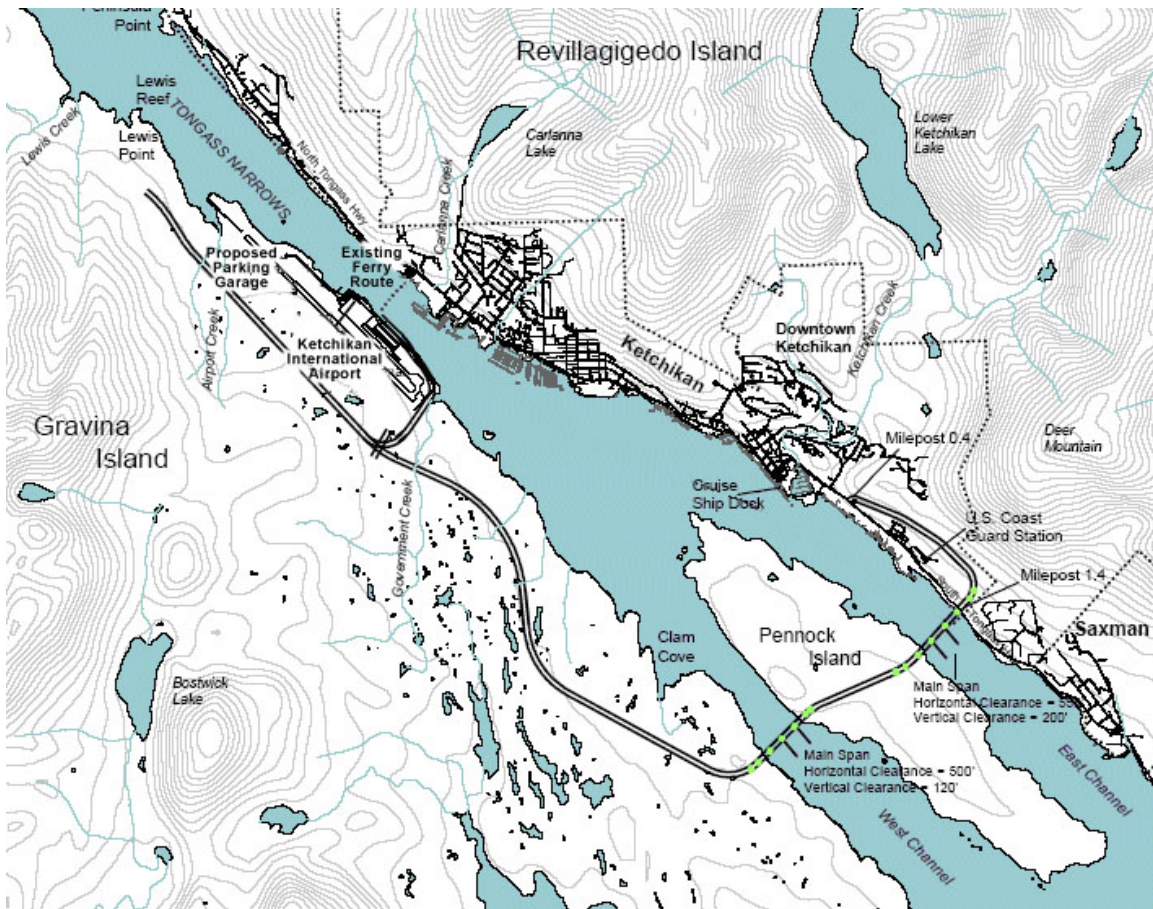


## **\$315 Million Bridge to Nowhere** **February 9, 2005**

Rep. Don Young (R-AK) is trying to sell America's taxpayers a \$315 million "bridge to nowhere" in rural Alaska. As Chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, he is in a very good position to get his way. But Rep. Young should be stopped from using his political clout to force federal taxpayers to pay for a bridge that is ridiculous in its scope, unjustified on its merits, and far too expensive for taxpayers to swallow at a time of record federal deficits.

If Rep. Young succeeds, tiny Ketchikan, Alaska, a town with less than 8,000 residents (about 13,000 if the entire county is included) will receive hundreds of millions of federal dollars to build a bridge to Gravina Island (population: 50). This bridge will be nearly as long as the Golden Gate Bridge and taller than the Brooklyn Bridge.



The Gravina Bridge would replace a 7-minute ferry ride from Ketchikan to Ketchikan Airport on Gravina Island. Project proponents tell the public that the bridge is a transportation necessity, though the ferry system adequately handles passenger traffic between the islands, including traffic to and from the airport.<sup>1</sup> Some herald the project as the savior of Ketchikan because it will open up land on Pennock Island to residential development, despite the fact that Gravina's population has been shrinking.

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<sup>1</sup> Alaska Airlines, the only commercial passenger airline that flies to Ketchikan, runs seven daily flight routes in the summer and six in the winter. Two ferries, which run every 15 minutes in the summer and every 30 minutes in the winter, provide transportation to and from the airport. The city also maintains a third ferry in case of emergency.

## Project Costs

In September 2004, the U.S. Department of Transportation released its decision on the Gravina Access Project, and chose the most expensive alternative as the preferred project.<sup>2</sup> The official cost estimate at the time was \$230 million. Recently, the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) increased the estimate for the project by more than one-third, to \$315 million. Annual operating and maintenance costs, much of which would likely be paid for by federal taxpayers, will cost an additional \$110,000.<sup>3</sup>

At \$315 million, the Gravina Bridge will cost \$23,649 per Ketchikan Gateway Borough resident. In comparison, Boston's Big Dig

**Table 1.<sup>4</sup>**

	<b>Big Dig</b>	<b>Gravina Bridge</b>
Assumed cost	\$14,000,000,000	\$315,000,000
Population	5,800,000	13,320
Cost per person	2,414	23,649

project—a massive tunneling and highway project and the poster child of government waste—cost less than one-tenth this amount on a per resident basis (see Table 1).

**Table 2.<sup>5</sup>**

	<b>Big Dig</b>	<b>Gravina Bridge</b>
Daily usage (vehicles/day)	500,000	1,000
Annual cost (5% discount rate)	\$700,000,000	\$15,750,000
Number of trips per year	182,500,000	365,000
Cost per trip	\$3.84	\$43.15
Cost of ferry for a car	NA	\$6.00
Cost of ferry for a pedestrian	NA	\$4.00

Comparing the Big Dig and Gravina Bridge on a per trip basis also yields striking evidence of how wasteful the Gravina Bridge project really is. Each trip over Gravina Bridge will

cost more than \$43, compared to about \$4 for each Big Dig trip (see Table 2). That means each trip over the Gravina Bridge would cost more than ten times as much as a trip through the most wasteful highway project in America's history!

In addition to the millions of dollars that will come from the federal government, state and local sources will be responsible for approximately \$63 million, or 20 percent of the project's cost. Ketchikan residents are understandably concerned about how this shift in government priorities will affect the area's already sparse government funding. In the winter of 2002-03 snowplowing on ancillary roads in the Ketchikan Gateway Borough was discontinued due to lack of funding. Residents point out that the area's need to

<sup>2</sup> Alternative F1 is actually two bridges: an east channel bridge—from Revilla Island, where Ketchikan is located, to Pennock Island—that would be 3,610 feet long and 250 feet high and a west channel bridge—from Pennock Island to Gravina Island—that would be 2,690 feet long and 160 feet high. The two bridge design was chosen so cruise ships can freely pass through the east channel. For the purposes of this paper, this project is treated as one bridge project.

<sup>3</sup> HDR Alaska, Inc. July 2003. "Gravina Access Project: Preliminary Quantities and Cost Estimate, Technical Memorandum." Page 10.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Samuel. "Alaskan pork-Ketchikan bridge vs Big Dig." April 10, 2004. TOLLROADSnews. Available on line: <http://www.tollroadsnews.com/cgi-bin/a.cgi/uvmy4IsWEdiRW6r2jffFwDw>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Samuel's calculations for Gravina Bridge were updated using most current cost estimates. The estimation of 1,000 trips/day was attained by applying to Gravina Bridge the same ratio of vehicle trips per thousand local population that the Big Dig generates. In Boston, the airport generates 150,000 vehicle trips, or about 25 trips per thousand local population. If this ratio is applied to Ketchikan, the resulting estimate of daily trips is 350. Samuels utilized a much more conservative estimate of 1,000 trips per day.

match the \$23 million in federal funds that were allocated for the Gravina Bridge in 1997 might be causing state and local governments to cut back on much needed social services and road maintenance priorities. Building more major road projects will further exacerbate the region's inability to carry out necessary infrastructure maintenance.

### **Practical Planning or Political Pork?**

The Gravina Access Project would purportedly improve surface transportation between Ketchikan and Gravina Island, yet there is little indication that things will be better with the bridge. Few local residents are on record complaining about the short ferry ride to Gravina, and many tourists love the ferry ride from the airport to town. One Ketchikan resident told ABC News: "When people come to Ketchikan, that little ferry ride is what they remember." And still, despite the lack of demonstrated need, federal taxpayers will pay to construct and maintain the bridge and connecting roads.

Rep. Young is so supportive of the Gravina Bridge that he used his significant influence as Chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee to secure \$175 million worth of earmarks for the project in last year's failed reauthorization of the six-year transportation bill. Previously, Rep. Young secured a \$1 million earmark in the fiscal year (FY) 2002 appropriations bill and a \$2 million earmark in the FY 2003 appropriations bill. Sen. Ted Stevens (R-AK) has also helped out by securing \$20.4 million worth of earmarks in the 1997 "Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century" (TEA-21).<sup>6</sup>

"When people come to Ketchikan, that little ferry ride is what they remember"

Though Congress failed to agree on a reauthorization bill for the nation's transportation program in 2004, this will be a Congressional priority early in 2005. There is little doubt that Rep. Young will continue his attempts to secure the same massive earmarks for Gravina Bridge. He should be prevented from using his significant political power to support a wasteful and unjustified local pet project at the expense of federal taxpayers.

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<sup>6</sup> November 1999. Section 1101(a)(13) of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (Public Law 105-178). Attachment 3.