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Alaska's Megaproject Mentality

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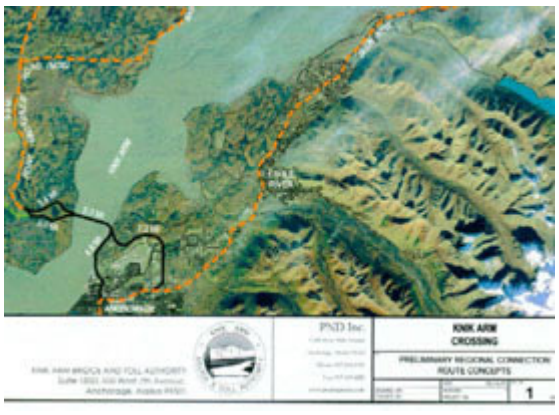
A project is defined as a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product or service, or the proposal of something to be done, scheme, or a special unit of work, distinct from ongoing operational work. Thus, the end result sought may be distinct from the mission from the organization which undertakes it because the project specifically has a deadline and the endeavor is temporary.



Each project is unique, and although they tend to be temporary in nature, the intent is to create a lasting result. And like organic entities, projects have life-cycles. The word project comes from the Latin word projectum from projicere, "to throw something forwards" which in turn comes from pro-, which denotes something that precedes the action of the next part of the word in time and

jacere, "to throw", as in the word "projectiles". Following these Latin roots, a megaproject could be defined as a million smaller sub-projects combined into one.

The US Federal Highway Administration defines megaprojects as major infrastructure projects that cost more than one billion dollars, or as "projects of a significant cost that attract a high level of public attention or political interest because of substantial direct and indirect impacts on the community, environment, and budgets".

Projects are essential to human society, dating back before recorded history. As far back as the construction of Stonehenge, the Great Pyramids of Egypt, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon or the Great Wall of China, large construction projects were deemed vital to civilization itself. Modern examples of megaprojects include Boston's Big Dig, China's Three Gorges Dam, the Panama Canal expansion, the tunnel underneath the English Channel, the Oresund Crossing between Sweden and Denmark, and Switzerland's Gotthard Base Tunnel. Such endeavors require a massive amount of engineering, or the putting of scientific knowledge related to such huge amounts of energy and materials to practical use. Civil engineering in particular is necessary for roads, bridges, tunnels, dams, railroads, canals, and airports, to name a few.

A principal, though unspoken, purpose of a megaproject is to ensure the immortality of major politicians, such as the Hoover Dam, or the airports named after Ted Stevens, Charles de Gaulle and John F. Kennedy. Humans will in all likelihood continue to erect large structures and monuments to themselves.

A project becomes pathological when its promised benefits are blown way out of proportion, obscuring other issues and actual needs. In other words, a pathological megaproject destroys more than it creates, while displacing more urgent projects such as the maintenance of existing infrastructure. A sure symptom of megaproject pathology is when the project's construction activity is the main benefit ("make work"). As the old cliché goes about how war is too important to be left to the generals, the construction of bridges is too important to be left to the bridge builders.

Projects and Society

Progressive activists need to learn more about 'project management', if for no other reason that corporations, government agencies and the military have so much of their operations based around projects. A successful "anti-project" movement or campaign is a project in itself, and thus requires at least some knowledge of project management techniques.

It is essential to study how such large projects are organized. A proper feasibility study of a project involves a rigorous evaluation of all feasible alternatives. Mindless boosterism pushes along megaprojects long before a proper feasibility study has been completed. An incomplete, pre-rigged feasibility study can describe in detail the technical aspects of how some big project should be built, while ignoring a standard economic and environmental analysis.

Successfully opposing any megaproject often involves presenting sustainable development ideas as more rational alternatives. The

language of project management, especially in regards to financial risk, can also be used to successfully debunk megaproject proposals. In order to make the best use of society's resources, the planning, designing, and construction phases of a project must be democratic and transparent.

Economies that are heavily dependent on natural resource extraction tend to be very project-oriented. This development scenario is common in "Third World" nations dependent on natural resource exports, with virtually all of the investment capital coming from outside. And of course, persons involved in the creation and promotion of the project stand to gain financially if the project goes forward.

Megaprojects were seen as symbols of nationalism in what was formerly known as the Third World. Big dams are a good example because they are so capital-intensive, and (not unlike Alaskan energy developments) are dependent upon absentee investors. The resulting reservoirs of such projects often force thousands of people to move while destroying large tracts of forest and farm land. Also, the power generated from these dams often ends up going to export-oriented developments such as mines and smelters instead of electrifying the homes of the average person.

Some of the more revealing cases are the Cold War dam projects of Africa built during the 1960s and 70s: the US/UK-funded Akosombo Dam (Ghana), Inga Dam (Congo), Kainji Dam (Nigeria), Kariba Dam (Zimbabwe/Zambia) as well as the Soviet-funded Aswan High Dam in Egypt, and the Portuguese/South African-funded Cahora Bassa Dam (Mozambique). However,

these African dams were dwarfed by the 1970s-80s mega-hydroelectric projects in Latin America, such as the massive Itapu Dam in Brazil/Paraguay, and the slightly less huge Guri Dam in Venezuela.

Also important are the big dam projects of India. In 1955, India's first Prime Minister, Jawnhalal Nehru, said the dams "are the temples of modern India". Three years later, Nehru said that big dams were a "disease of gigantism." Today, in the Narmada Valley of central India, an ongoing multi-dam project involves the forced removal of hundreds of thousands of people. In all of these mega-dam projects, the foreign financiers and consultants assume that the project has all the necessary clearances, not checking whether social and environmental costs are adequately addressed. Inevitably, this results in a dam project being 'sold' to the public by exaggerating the benefits and underestimating the costs. Incidentally, many of these dam projects helped bury some of the world's poorest nations in massive debts still owed to Western creditors.

Pathology of the Knik Arm Crossing

Studying Alaska's past forays into Big Proposal territory can help us understand the megaproject proposals of today. There isn't space in this article to investigate all the present-day Alaska megaproject proposals such as the North Slope gas pipeline or the Pebble Mine, so here we will focus on the Knik Arm Bridge as a prime example of a Alaska megaproject proposal. This proposal is simply a 21st century incarnation of the 1950s government project ideology, along with 'move-the-capitol-to-Mat-

Su' schemes dating back to the 1970s.

The scale of human beings in Alaska is so small when compared to the scale of the land, so the philosophy of "bigger is better" tends to follow in such a big territory. Emily Ferry, former coordinator of the Alaska Transportation Priorities Project described this in the July 25, 2006 edition (www.csmonitor.com/2006/0725/p01s04-uspo.html) of the Christian Science Monitor: "We live in a grand state, and it inspires grand thinking, which can be a good thing until you take it to extremes. And then it gets a little ridiculous".

The Knik Arm Bridge idea has a long history, proposed in various forms since the 1950s, with boosters even back then claiming Anchorage lacked sufficient space for development. Even today, large numbers of vacant lots still exist in midtown and south Anchorage. The "world-wide recognition which would accompany the construction of this unique and monumental project would certainly be valuable to the State of Alaska," said a 1972 study prepared for what was then called the state Department of Highways.

Similar to these early Knik Arm crossing proposals was the "Seward's Success" development proposal dating to 1969. With plans to house 5,000 people initially, building up to an eventually 20,000 residents, everything would be included in one dome structure, all enclosed and connected by skyways, moving sidewalks, escalators, and bike paths, which cars prohibited. All of the spaces inside would be kept at room temperature. A tramway across Knik Arm would have connected the new city to Anchorage. Not coincidentally, the proposal was unveiled at a

press conference the same week as the big Prudhoe Bay oil lease sale. In the column "The Long View: Big Domes", by Ross Coen, in the December 2006 edition of the Ester Republic, writing about the Seward's Success proposal:

.in the north, where the obstacles to development posed by the natural world so often require technological solutions on a grand scale. we are so fascinated by every application of that technology. That so many wild schemes never materialize. is less important what they tell us about our character and collective views about our relationship with science. Yet finding solutions to social problems often requires value judgments, too. Science can be an incredible tool for identifying and even mitigating such problems, but it is up to the user of that science to consider ethics and morals in the application. Science itself may have no intrinsic values, but there is no such thing as value-free science.

However, megaproject proposals such as Seward's Success are less an example of "science-as-panacea" than of the inherent growth urge of capitalism. In the case of Project Chariot (to be discussed in part two of this article), the project was stopped largely due to scientists raising important questions about its risks to the environment. The science of ecology has proved instrumental in fighting many a pathological megaproject scheme. With such a fetish of growth-at-all-costs, planet-threatening environmental problems such as climate change are just increased by this growth. This is why large energy corporations like ExxonMobil, which obviously have a stake in both megaprojects and high technology, also go out of their way to discredit the hard science of global warming.

Simply put, putting growth and expansion above all other human values is the ideology of the cancer cell. In biological systems, cancerous cells only want to grow and multiply, and care about nothing else. Like the 1950s science fiction movie The Blob, where an amorphous, amoeba-like creature from outer space just keeps consuming people and keeps getting bigger before finally being frozen.

Despite the state-funded nature of Alaska megaproject proposals past and present, 'laissez-fair' capitalism has a lot to do with it. For example, just think of all the contractors and sub-contractors who get lucrative deals because of government-funded projects. In the case of the ill-fated Don Young's Way proposal, the capitalist free-for-all would result in an onslaught of ill-planned suburban housing developments and strip malls . sort of like an 'instant Wasilla' which would extend from Port MacKenzie to Big Lake.

Naturally, the Knik Arm Crossing mega-proposal has already spawned some son-of-megaproject proposals, such as a new airport over in what is now pristine wetlands to replace Ted Stevens International. Mat-Su boosters have even boasted about how the Matanuska-Susitna Borough will have more people than the Municipality of Anchorage in thirty years. This is highly unlikely with the increasing cost of petroleum, as private automobile commuting will become increasingly un-economic.

According to official estimates, a bridge across Knik Arm would lead to zero increase the total amount of population and jobs in the greater Anchorage/Mat-Su area. What it would affect is the nature of urban development in the whole region, effectively

locking in a low-density, sprawling style of development. Any project management textbook will recommend a 'systems approach' to this problem. That is, what would serve the region's needs better would be ferry service across Knik Arm, improved public transit and more effective region-wide urban planning.

Anchorage does not need more "space for development", but wiser use of existing developed spaces. A megaproject that Anchorage really needs is a mass-transit system combined with commuter rail.

To conclude, here is a list of three Alaska megaprojects that did get built, and remain vital to the state's economy: the construction of the Alaska railroad (opened in 1925), the Alaska Highway and military base construction of the 1940s, and the Trans-Alaska Pipeline (finished in 1977). The pipeline in total cost $10 billion to complete, or ten times the original estimate made in 1968. Problems related to pipeline certainly arose such as oil spills, but at least the project-boosters of the Trans Alaska Pipeline System actually managed to get the thing built. The environmental regulations (fought by the big oil companies) imposed, along with the settlement of Native land claims, in the end led to a much better project. Economically, these three Alaska megaprojects have paid for themselves many times over, and are models of successful megaprojects. But what makes them different from all the no-go proposals thrown around over the years? Maybe the three projects listed above actually do something useful. The planners of these three projects actually took the time to evaluate all feasible alternatives before proceeding with construction.

In the end, large construction projects are an essential part of

human civilization, they just have to be done right. A genuinely useful megaproject must arise out of any public planning process, in which the citizens of the region looked at the long-term needs and options and discussed what should be done. The hype surrounding megaproject proposals also serves as a convenient way to distract the public from the more day-to-day problems of society and government. Seriously addressing our state's shameful social problems requires fundamental questions about the way our society functions, the types of questions that politicians hate being asked.

Part two of this article will describe five Alaska megaproject proposals from the past which were never built.

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