

Knik Arm ferry service nears reality

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Shawn Wilson/KTUU

Point MacKenzie, Alaska -

The expansion of Port MacKenzie -- the little brother to the Port of Anchorage -- passed the halfway point Friday.

The \$13 million project will put a ferry terminal on the other side of Cook Inlet, a terminal that could help motorists travel more quickly

between the Mat-Su Borough and Anchorage.

The ferry service will be in place long before any bridge can be built between the two communities.

Just a mile north of Anchorage sits the fastest-growing community in all of Alaska -- the Mat-Su Valley. But just try getting there from here -- it's an 80-mile drive around Knik Arm. A bridge spanning that mile won't be built for at least a decade. But a ferry, carrying at least a few cars, could be operating in as little as two years.

"This is the trestle that comes out 485 feet from our barge dock."

It will soon be the fifth-biggest dock in all of Alaska -- the dock at Port MacKenzie in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. After years of planning, the \$13 million construction project finally got underway in July, and it should be completed by the end of November.



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"Look how close we are to Anchorage. It's only a mile-and-a-half across."

The idea behind the dock is to link the state's largest city with the state's fastest-growing "suburb."



"We actually are going to start a ferry service from the port there to -- right about right here," says Mat-Su Borough Mayor Tim Anderson (left).

“The landing's gonna be right near this spot.”

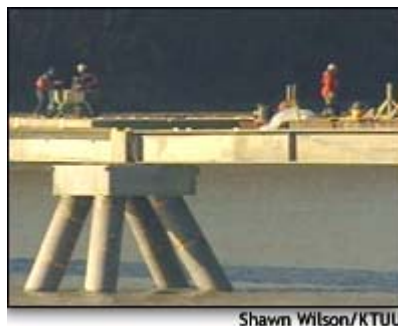
By late 2006, the dock project will be home to a car-carrying ferry, which will greatly reduce the commuting time between Anchorage and Mat-Su.

“Two-hour drive -- 12 minutes across,” says Mat-Su Borough Manager John Duffy.

But cars aren't the only thing that will be ferried from this dock. The facility will also help carry gravel across Cook Inlet, gravel that's needed in construction projects for Anchorage's growing economy.

“It'll create more jobs and more opportunity,” says Borough Assemblywoman Jody Simpson.

The new port is nowhere near as large as the Port of Anchorage, which handles 80 percent of all goods that come into Alaska. But this second port is intended to complement its big brother port, and add perhaps 100 jobs to the Southcentral economy.



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“That's economic development,” says Port Director Mark Van Dongan. “That's what we're trying to make happen with Port MacKenzie.”

“Our two boroughs complement each other,” says Anchorage Assembly Chairman Dick Traini. “They're not in competition one with another.”



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If all goes as planned, the new dock facility will see its first overseas cargo ship arrive in January. That will bring new business here and ultimately a new ferry service that will link the state's fastest-growing community with its largest city.

The ferry could start operations within the next two-and-a-half years. It will carry up to 35 cars each time it sails, bringing the Mat-Su and Anchorage quite a bit closer.

After the ferry service begins, it may be followed -- in a decade or so -- by a bridge linking the Mat-Su and Anchorage. Some people question whether the area really needs both. The advantage of the ferry is that it can go into service years before any bridge could be built. What will happen to the ferry if a bridge goes up isn't clear.

Authorities say the ferry will also be equipped as a high-capacity rescue ship, ready to respond in the event a passenger jet crashes into Cook Inlet. That added rescue capacity is something that emergency officials welcome.

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