

Editorial/Opinion

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Alaska thanks you

By Nick Jans

As you stand at the gas pump this summer, think of Alaska. No, not as a fantasy to escape the heat or the price of your latest fill-up. Instead, consider that each spin of the pump's meter means money slurping north, straight from your wallet.

If you live in Texas, Georgia, Florida or New Jersey, that steady siphon is a certainty — your gas tax dollars are funding a procession of lavish road and bridge projects thousands of miles away, including a pile of boondoggles that we Alaskans don't need, and that many of us don't want.

It's a fact: For every dollar we Alaskans pay in at-the-pump gas taxes, we get \$6.60 back, thanks to your generous, unwitting donors.

According to Taxpayers for Common Sense, a non-partisan watchdog group in Washington, that breaks down to \$1,150 for every Alaskan in "earmark" funding for in-state projects alone, 25 times what the average American garners for his or her home state.

How could this be? Alaska is so rich that residents not only pay no state income tax, but we get individual yearly checks as our share of the oil wealth. Why should your gas taxes, which are supposed to fill potholes in your local interstate or repair your decaying bridges, end up so far from home?

Bringing it home

Simple. We have Don Young. You don't.

As chairman of the House

WHAT'S YOUR STATE'S TAKE?

The wide gap in the distribution of gas-tax money should be enough to make some taxpayers see red. Alaska, for instance, receives \$6.60 for every dollar paid in federal gas taxes; Texas gets 86 cents on the dollar.

1	Alaska	\$6.60
2	District of Columbia	\$3.53
3	South Dakota	\$2.28
4	Hawaii	\$2.23
5	Montana	\$2.22
6	North Dakota	\$2.17
7	Rhode Island	\$2.17

Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, our lone congressman has incredible clout in determining where federal funding (provided by your tax dollars) ends up. The six-year, \$295 billion behemoth of a transportation bill

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8	Vermont	\$1.83
9	West Virginia	\$1.69
10	Delaware	\$1.60
11	Idaho	\$1.46
12	Connecticut	\$1.41
13	Wyoming	\$1.40
14	New York	\$1.21
15	Pennsylvania	\$1.17
16	New Mexico	\$1.12
17	Nevada	\$1.08
18	New Hampshire	\$1.08
19	Minnesota	\$1.07
20	Utah	\$1.07
21	Wisconsin	\$1.05
22	Iowa	\$1.03
23	Alabama	\$1.02
24	Arkansas	\$1.02
25	Kansas	\$1.01
26	Oregon	\$1.01
27	Maine	\$1.00
28	Washington	\$0.99
29	Mississippi	\$0.98
30	Nebraska	\$0.97
31	Illinois	\$0.96
32	Maryland	\$0.95
33	Massachusetts	\$0.95
34	Virginia	\$0.95
35	Colorado	\$0.93
36	Missouri	\$0.92
37	California	\$0.91
38	Kentucky	\$0.91
39	North Carolina	\$0.90
40	Tennessee	\$0.90
41	Indiana	\$0.89
42	Louisiana	\$0.89
43	Ohio	\$0.89
44	Arizona	\$0.88
45	Michigan	\$0.88
46	Oklahoma	\$0.88
47	South Carolina	\$0.88
48	New Jersey	\$0.87
49	Florida	\$0.86
50	Georgia	\$0.86
51	Texas	\$0.86

Source: Federal Highway Administration. Data based on a five-year average from 1998-2002. It includes discretionary funds.

was approved in the House of Representatives and easily passed in the Senate on Tuesday. Young has bragged that the bill is "stuffed like a turkey" with high-dollar projects earmarked for his home state, totaling \$721 million. In fact, Young is so fond of the bill that he named it TEA-LU, after his wife, Lu.

Here's a sampling of projects for Alaska funded by the Transportation Equity Act:

- \$223 million to build a bridge nearly as long as the Golden Gate and higher than the Brooklyn Bridge, to connect the town of Ketchikan (population 8,900) to the city airport on Gravina Island (population 50). Currently, the link is provided by a 10-minute ferry ride that has worked for years. This proposed project won Young a "Golden Fleece Award" from Taxpayers for Common Sense — an award he has told supporters he cherishes.

- \$200 million for another "bridge to nowhere," which would lead from Anchorage, the state's largest city, to a rural port that has one tenant and a handful of homes. Total cost for the project has been estimated at upwards of \$1.5 billion. Not even the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce wants it.

- \$15 million to begin work on a 68-mile, \$284 million access road to Juneau, the state capital, even though a majority of area residents have said they would prefer improving service in the existing ferry system instead. The proposed road would compromise so many ecologically sensitive areas that the Environmental Protection Agency, in an extremely unusual move, has stated its opposition to the project.

Of course, the ultimate beneficiaries are a handful of corporate interests (such as Couer Alaska, which is developing a large mine on the path of the proposed Juneau road), private individuals, timber companies and Young himself. By proving once again that he's Alaska's sugar daddy, the congressman cements his position for another term in office.

Meanwhile, transportation infrastructure across the nation suffers from neglect: More than 150,000 bridges, 7,500 miles of interstate highway and more than 28,000 miles of other roads are in immediate need of repair.

When both the arch-conservative Cato Institute and the ultra-green Sierra Club preach the same message — fix what's here before we build more — you know

there's a problem.

Young is unfazed by any opposition, the essential unfairness of his actions, or the fact that he's squandering federal taxes at a time of record deficits.

"We make no apologies," he says. "If I hadn't done fairly well for our state, I'd be ashamed of myself."

His solution to budgetary shortfalls in TEA-LU? Rather than cut back, he actually proposed raising federal gas taxes further, though the notion failed for lack of support.

While Young may be the poster child for this new wave of tax-and-spend Republicans, he has plenty of company on both sides of the aisle. For example, Democratic Sens. Daniel Inouye of Hawaii and Robert Byrd of West Virginia share a legendary ability to bring home the bacon. And according to the watchdog organization Citizens Against Government Waste, Young's fellow Alaskan in the Senate, Republican Ted Stevens, consistently has led the entire congressional delegation in his ability to pack on the pork.

'Oinkers' in Congress

Paying homage to the senior Stevens' success, Young once told an Alaska audience, "I want to be a little oinker, myself."

The fact is, most legislators want to be oinkers. Their constituents expect them to use every shred of influence and power to direct every possible dollar of funding home, as if their political lives depend on it — which they do. Don Young isn't any different or worse; he's just better positioned.

Finally, the problem far transcends the boundaries of TEA-LU, the excesses of which are mere symptoms of a deeply flawed funding process in dire need of reform. Even funding for the war on terrorism, with national security at stake, is tainted by abuse and waste, as are armed services appropriations; congressmen fight with the same tooth-and-nail ardor over useless weapons systems, bases and facilities as they do over funding for bridges and bus stops.

The antiquated system of earmarking pork barrel projects based on seniority or clout is, in itself, a costly bridge to nowhere — one we can no longer afford. A fair formula for distributing federal funds is certainly within reach; all that would have been required to drastically cut and reform TEA-LU was a simple amendment to cull all earmarks. Despite a few modest rumblings, nothing was done. Unless action is taken in the final conference stage, it'll be up to the president to carry through his threat of a veto of this monument to waste and excess, sending it back to the House, back into Young's lap.

Focus down, and think about it next time you're standing at the gas pump, all you donors. That steady gurgle is the sound of your money draining away.

Alaskan writer Nick Jans is a member of USA TODAY's board of contributors. He also is author of the forthcoming book The Grizzly Maze, to be published in July.