



Northwest Territories

Yukon Territory

Alberta

British Columbia

U.S.A.

Pacific Ocean

MAP OF THE
Alaska Highway

	MILES
Dawson Creek to Whitehorse	918
Whitehorse to Beaver Creek	282
Beaver Creek to Fairbanks	323

The Alaska Highway: Background to Decision

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Economic feasibility has long been a major deterrent to road development in the North. The cost involved is usually too great to attract private investment and also too great to be deemed *popular* for federal investment during times of economic stress, when construction costs could be considerably lower. It has not been a case of *can* a particular road be built or what is the cost, but *can the road pay?*

The consideration of roads into the Canadian Northwest is not of recent origin. Although the Alaska Highway has only recently celebrated its twenty-fifth year of existence, its planning roots are much older. Many laymen have the impression that the Alaska Highway was conceived only by the necessity of having an emergency road to protect the northwestern corridor of Alaska and the Aleutian Islands; they further believe that the engineers rushed forth, blind, into the unknown wilderness.

The basis of this thinking has probably been established by the misinterpretation of the following directive to Chief of Engineers, The War Department, 14 February 1942 (U.S. 79th Congress 1946, p. 13):

. . . It is desired that you undertake the construction, with the Engineer troops, of a pioneer-type road from Fort St. John, Canada, to Big Delta, Alaska, via Fort Nelson, Canada, Watson Lake, Canada, Whitehorse, Canada, and Boundary, Alaska. It is further desired that you arrange with the Public Roads Administration to follow the Engineer troops, to correct alignment and grade, construct permanent bridges and culverts, and provide for the completion of the project. . . .

Nine months and six days after the above directive was issued a federal ceremony marked the opening of the Alaska Highway. Although original publicity credited Engineer troops with the building of the entire pioneer road, the record shows that the Public Roads contractors made a substantial contribution to this tremendous effort. Considering the time involved and the circumstances of war, the feat is remarkable. However, many historians have disregarded a group of contributors who made the entire project possible: the planners.

The construction of the Alaska Highway was seriously considered as early as 1929, although there was some vague interest in such a project during the previous decade. In 1929, however, the movement took a stride forward, when two International Highway Associations were formed, the first in Fairbanks and the second in Dawson City. The purpose of these organizations was to stimulate public interest in the project and then to advocate the necessary legislation and to make the other essential arrangements for its implementation. Within weeks of the formation of these groups, and almost coincidentally, the Government of British

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Columbia began to make inquiries, and initiated informal exchanges of information on the subject with Alaskan officials. Immediately thereafter many groups became interested (U.S. Department of State 1933, p. 6).

The project was considered and endorsed by many associations and commercial bodies in Alaska and the United States. Those in Alaska that took such action include: The Chambers of Commerce of Fairbanks, Anchorage, Juneau, Wrangell, Ketchikan, Seward, Sitka, and Nome. The following local associations in the United States took similar action: Seattle Chamber of Commerce; Western Motor Clubs Conference, 1929; Automobile Club of Washington; Seattle Mining Club; and the Washington Good Roads Association. The following national organizations also considered and endorsed the proposal for further study of the project: American Road Builders' Association; and the United States Chamber of Commerce.

Owing to the response and support from all over the United States and Canada, the Legislature of Alaska adopted a *memorial*, 17 April 1929, which petitioned the U.S. Congress to take steps to arrange for conferences between representatives of the United States and Canada. On 1 May 1929, that same body passed an Act which provided for the "advertising of the advantages of the project and appropriating funds to be used for that purpose."

On 3 October 1929, Mr. McNary introduced the following Bill before the Senate of the United States (U.S. 71st Congress 1930*a*):

Be it enacted by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that there is hereby created a commission of three members to cooperate when the Government of Canada shall have agreed through the usual international channels, with representatives of the Dominion of Canada in a study regarding the construction of a highway to connect the northwestern part of the United States with British Columbia, Yukon Territory, and Alaska, with a view to ascertaining whether such a highway is feasible and economically practicable. One of the commissioners shall be an official of the Department to be designated by the Secretary of Agriculture, and the remaining commissioners shall be reported to Congress.

Section 2. The commission is authorized to employ such clerical, engineering, and other employees and to purchase such supplies as may be deemed necessary to carry out the provisions of this Act. The commissioners shall receive no additional compensation for their services under this Act.

Section 3. For the purposes of the Act, there is hereby authorized to be appropriated the sum of \$25,000. In addition to this amount, the commission is authorized to receive and expend for such purposes such sums as may be contributed from any source.

After consideration and amendment, the bill was passed by act of Congress and approved 15 May 1930. The Act read as follows (U.S. 71st Congress 1930*b*):

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that the President of the United States is hereby authorized to designate three special commissioners to cooperate with representatives of the Dominion of Canada in a study regarding the construction of a highway to connect the northwestern part of the United States with British Columbia, Yukon Territory, and Alaska with a view to ascertaining whether such a highway is feasible and economically practicable. Upon completion of such study the results shall be reported to Congress.

Section 2. The sum of \$10,000 is hereby authorized to be appropriated, out of any money in the Treasury not otherwise appropriated for the purposes of carrying out the provisions of this Act.

As provided in the Act, President Hoover appointed three special commissioners: Herbert H. Rice, Ernest W. Sawyer, and Major Malcolm Elliot (CE-USA). A similar Canadian Delegation was appointed to study the matter with their American counterparts: Hon. George Black (former Speaker of the Canadian House of Commons), J. M. Wardle (Canadian Department of Public Works), and G. P. Napier (B.C. Department of Public Works). The Americans met with the Canadian representatives for the first time in Victoria, British Columbia, on 9 October 1931.

The collected data were thoroughly considered and discussed. The project was determined to be feasible from an engineering and construction standpoint. It was furthermore agreed that although substantial benefits would accrue from the project, more information was needed before it could be definitely determined that the undertaking would be economically sound (U.S. 76th Congress 1940, pp. 4-5).

A second meeting was to be held in Washington, D.C. early in 1932, but due to insufficient time to collect data, the U.S. Department of State recommended that the members wait until 1933 for further meetings.

During the interim collecting-stage there was much activity. In 1930 the Honorable Simon Fraser Tolmie, Premier of British Columbia, organized and conducted an international automobile caravan from Vancouver to Hazelton for the purpose of "exploring the northern roads and advocating the extension of the system," to be called the Pacific-Yukon Highway. During the same year, airplane and ground reconnaissances were made by the British Columbia Government in the northern part of the Province for the purpose of locating the most favourable route. The American group also took preliminary flights over the area extending from Dawson City to Fairbanks in 1931 to determine the best possible route between those two points (U.S. Department of State 1933, p. 7).

In addition to the increased interest shown by both federal governments, there was a steady and substantial growth of the highway system in British Columbia, which included a good gravelled-surfaced road from Vancouver to Hazelton (a distance of some 815 miles).

A report dated 1 May 1933 was submitted by the American Commissioners to President Roosevelt, who submitted it to Congress. In this report the Commissioners made the following recommendations (U.S. Department of State 1933, p. 3):

1. That negotiation be conducted with the Government of Canada, through regular channels, with a view to ascertaining the attitude of Canada with respect to entering into an agreement whereby each Government within its own borders would undertake to survey and locate the best and most practicable route for a highway which would connect the northwestern part of the United States with British Columbia, Yukon Territory, and Alaska; prepare specifications and reliable estimates of cost and resulting benefits of said project; and investigate plans for financing the project. The respective organizations shall be authorized to communicate directly with each other for the purpose of coordination.

2. That if such agreement be reached, suitable allotments or appropriations should be made available to the Alaska Road Commission for carrying out the purposes of the agreement.
3. That the respective Governments in formulating their road construction programs conform so far as practicable in their own interests to the general route proposed for this highway so that as many as possible of the local projects will be available for and form a part of the main project.
4. That consideration be given by the road-building agencies of Alaska and Yukon Territory to the construction of the Fairbanks-Dawson Road without waiting for the adoption of the entire project, in order to develop the immediate territory and provide an early connection between these two communities, as well as complete a vital link in the proposed through highway.

With the submission of this report, the life of the special commission expired. The project was on the verge of construction, when it was lost in the uncertainties of the Depression. Although the 1933 report of the Commission played a major part in later decisions, it was for the moment lost.

The project was revived again on 18 April 1934 (U.S. 73rd Congress 1934). In a report on that bill, the Secretary of War advised that the proposed highway was feasible from an engineering viewpoint and could be constructed at a reasonable cost, but expressed no opinion of the economic or military value of the project.

In the following year the topic was again introduced and an appropriation for construction was suggested. The report summarized the benefits to the United States as follows (U.S. 74th Congress 1935):

- (a) Development of Alaska through making the territory accessible by highway, resulting in an increase of population and consequent increase in revenue from taxes, tending to decrease the present necessity for federal appropriations for the support of the territory.
- (b) The road would be a great contribution to the welfare of American citizens now living in Alaska under adverse conditions, providing a physical connection with the vast continental road system.
- (c) Opening of new country that is now practically inaccessible, giving opportunity for settlement, investment of capital and employment.
- (d) The new road would make accessible to the continental highway system the existing road net in central Alaska comprising about 900 miles, providing a new and valuable area for exploration, for recreation, or business purposes.
- (e) The highway would foster air commerce with Alaska by furnishing a guiding landmark and providing service to aviators along the most practicable flying route to the interior of the territory and to Asia.
- (f) Promotion of friendly relations between citizens of the United States and Canada.

The 1933 Report of the American Commissioners was reviewed with regard to possible routes which might be used for the projected highway. Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, wrote the following [abstract] to the Chairman of the Committee on Roads of the House of Representatives, Wilburn Cartwright (U.S. 74th Congress 1935):

. . . In the Reconnaissance study the route proposed for the highway follows the existing road up to the Fraser River Valley in British Columbia to Hazelton; thence north to the headwaters of the Yukon River; thence down the Yukon Valley through Whitehorse and Dawson to Fairbanks, Alaska. It is estimated that the proposed

highway will be 2,256 miles in length from Seattle to Fairbanks; of this 1,073 miles are now completed. The cost of the highway is estimated to be \$2,000,000 for the Alaska section and \$12,000,000 for the Canadian Section. A table showing the approximate mileage completed and to construct as follows.

<i>Route</i>	<i>Completed Road</i>	<i>New Construction Needed</i>	<i>Total</i>
Seattle to Hazelton, British Columbia	882	0	882
Vancouver to Hazelton, B.C.	830	0	830
Hazelton to Yukon boundary	50	520	570
Yukon boundary to Alaska boundary	50	480	530
Alaska Boundary to Fairbanks	91	183	274
Seattle to Fairbanks	1,073	1,183	2,256
Vancouver to Fairbanks	1,021	1,183	2,204

The major objection of the Secretary was the appropriation of \$14,000,000 plus the negotiation appropriation. Others shared his feeling on the matter (U.S. 74th Congress 1935, p. 3):

The White House
Washington, June 20, 1935

Hon. Anthony J. Dimond
Delegate from Alaska, House of Representatives, Washington, D.C.

My Dear Mr. Dimond:

Answering your telegram of June 12, addressed to me at Hyde Park, I am in complete sympathy with the objectives sought in H.R. #160 which authorizes the President to negotiate and enter into agreements between the Government of the United States and the Dominion of Canada for the survey, locations and construction of the Alaska-Yukon highway.

As originally written, the bill authorized an appropriation, and I suggested that this be stricken out. As the bill stands, it has my hearty approval and I hope it will be enacted by Congress.

Sincerely yours,

Franklin D. Roosevelt

In order to secure action on the bill, Representative Dimond yielded to the desires of the Administration. In later discussion on the matter of appropriation of funds, Mr. Dimond made the following statement (U.S. 74th Congress 1935, p. 7):

The part in Alaska would cost about \$2,000,000. The part in Canada would cost about \$12,000,000. Of course, we are not appropriating for that (the Canadian portion), would not at any time. The utmost amount that the United States will have to spend on this road is \$2,000,000 to build this part in the Territory of Alaska.

In support of the Bill and the appropriation, Senator Lewis B. Schwellenbach submitted the following letter (U.S. 74th Congress 1935, p. 9):

United States Senate
Committee on Military Affairs
July 2, 1935

Statement of Senator Lewis B. Schwellenbach, of Washington, in support of the enactment of the Bill, known as the "Alaska Highway Bill":

1. The United States has a vast undeveloped frontier in the Territory of Alaska which needs untold development.
2. The passage of this bill would greatly benefit every type of business and stimulate employment as well.
3. Also, along the lines of development, the United States needs better access to Alaska, so that its citizens may have reasonable access to this undeveloped frontier.
4. Alaska is a natural defense area against any enemy which might attack from the west either the United States or Canada. It is, therefore, almost a necessity that the United States Government have an adequate trunk line connecting this outlying possession with the United States proper.
5. The benefit of this road to the northwest section of the United States would be immeasurable, both from an economic standpoint and also from the standpoint of national defense.
6. There are large mineral deposits which have never been developed, and the same will be opened up by the construction of the highway.

Although the idea was viewed sympathetically by the President of the United States and Congress, it remained only an idea because of the Depression. Nearly three years passed before any subsequent action was taken.

By act of Congress, approved 31 May 1938, the President was empowered to appoint a new commission to study the issue again. This commission was to be known as the Alaska International Highway Commission. On 16 August, the President appointed the following members to that Commission: Warren G. Magnuson, Ernest Gruening, Thomas Riggs, James W. Carey, and Donald McDonald. The work to which the Commission was immediately assigned was to cooperate with a similar five man commission appointed by the Dominion of Canada, in a study for the survey, location and construction of the proposed Alaska Highway.

No funds of any sort were provided for the necessary expense of the Commission during its first year of existence, thus their activities were greatly curtailed and handicapped. Some eleven months after its appointment, a fund of \$6,200 was appropriated (U.S. 76th Congress 1940, pp. 6-7).

Late in December 1938, Canada appointed the following five man Commission: Honorable Charles Stewart, Brig. General Tremblay, Mr. J. M. Wardle, Mr. Arthur Dixon, and Mr. J. W. Spencer. The major concern of the commission members was to plot routes which would be favourable in the construction of the Alaska Highway. On the basis of aerial reconnaissance and ground studies taken in 1939, three routes were suggested for consideration.

On 24-25 January 1940, a joint meeting of the U.S. and Canadian Commissioners was held in Ottawa. The general purpose of the meeting was to discuss possible routes. On this subject there was a lack of agreement. The Canadian Commissioners agreed that additional survey work was needed and agreed to do this work (U.S. 76th Congress 1940, p. 14).

On 18 August 1940, a Permanent Joint Board on Defense was established by

the United States and Canada. The Board was composed of six members from each country. Some forty days later, Germany, Italy, and Japan signed the tripartite alliance. Due to this obvious omen, the Joint Board gave serious consideration to the defence of Alaska and the Pacific Northwest.

On 14 November 1940, as its tenth recommendation, the Board adopted a resolution to construct an airway across Canada to Alaska. The recommendation was approved by both governments and in the winter of 1940-1 construction along the air route began.

In the meantime, there had been further proposals in the United States for the construction of a similar highway. Dr. Vilhjalmur Steffanson wrote letters to General G. C. Marshall recommending that the project follow the old overland Northwest Passage. Marshall replied (U.S. 79th Congress 1946, p. 7):

While such a road would certainly be of value, the War Department does not consider it of sufficient importance to justify its construction at this time on the basis of military necessity.

On 5 February 1941, the resolution to construct a highway to Alaska was proposed again by Mr. Dimond. While the bill was being considered, Germany invaded Russia and concern mounted as to a possible Japanese invasion from the west. On 6 October of that year, Secretary of War Stimson wrote in a letter (U.S. 79th Congress 1946, p. 8):

From an evaluation of the trend in international affairs, the construction of this highway now appears desirable as a long range defense measure.

Before action could be taken, however, the Japanese became the temporary masters of the Pacific. Great concern was then given for the safety of Alaska and the men stationed there. Mr. Dimond again made the appeal for the construction of the highway. On 16 January 1942, the President appointed a cabinet committee to consider the necessity of such a highway. By 2 February the committee was ready to act. They met with the War Plans Division of the General Staff and concluded that the highway was a necessity, and furthermore that it should satisfy two vital requirements (U.S. 79th Congress 1946, pp. 9-10):

1. Furnish a route to link up the established airfields and thus permit their expansion and:
2. Provide an overland auxiliary supply route to Alaska.

The project was approved by the Chief of Staff.

A major problem at this time was that construction costs had risen and previous calculations could not be considered. At the last request in 1940 for appropriations, \$25,000,000 had been requested. With regard to this matter, Mr. Dimond made the following statement on 2 February (U.S. 77th Congress 1942, p. 3):

At the outset it may be well to observe that although the amount of \$25,000,000 sought to be authorized by the bill for the construction of the proposed highway seemed to be adequate at the time the bill was introduced, and although as recently as 1933, a commission appointed by the President to study the Highway project

made another estimate that a suitable road could be built for \$14,000,000. In view of changed conditions, particularly since December 7, 1941, and in view of the pressing need for the construction and completion of the highway at the earliest possible moment, it now appears that \$25,000,000 will not be sufficient and, therefore, before consideration of the bill is concluded, I ask that the authorization be increased from \$25,000,000 to \$50,000,000.

The project and the appropriation was approved by the President on 11 February; and a directive was issued to the Chief of Engineers on 14 February. On 3 March, the President authorized an initial sum of \$10,000,000 to be used for travel and transportation of the military personnel involved in the project. This initial sum was five times greater than the amount requested for the Alaskan portion some ten years earlier.

Fourteen years after the first serious proposal was made in the Alaska Legislature, the Highway was completed. To be sure there were nine months and six days between the issuance of the directive and the completion of the road; but what of the years of planning and of the thousands of man-hours expended by the real pioneers, the planners? They should not be forgotten.

On 20 November 1942, after fourteen years of planning and subsequent legislation, the Highway became a reality — at a cost of \$139,794,567.

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