

In Alaska: A 40-Year Fight for Bering Link

From 1993 to 2003, Jeanette James served as a member of the Alaska House of Representatives. James, a Republican, served as Alaska House Majority Leader, 2001-03. She adopted the Bering Strait tunnel and rail project, and the associated U.S. railway route, as her personal abiding mission, for which she was the lead sponsor of numerous bills.



Mrs. James was interviewed by Richard Freeman on July 13.

EIR: For a decade and a half, you have been a point person for the Bering Strait rail-tunnel project, and for the segment of it that runs from Alaska through the Yukon Territory to northern British Columbia and into the North American rail grid.

James: Yes, since 1993, the year I entered the Alaska State legislature. I'm called the "Alaska Rail Lady."

EIR: How did you take the rail project under your wing?

James: I have always loved railroads, and I grew up by one, which went through my town, Woodburn, Oregon. Right down the main street were six lines of railroad track.

Then in 1993, Red Swanson, who had been a Senator in Alaska—he was then 80 years old—came to the legislature with two pieces of legislation that he wanted to get the Alaska legislature to pass. He had gone to the Senate, and hadn't been able to find any supporter, and he was getting pretty discouraged. (In the late 1970s, there was an authorization for a rail route from Fairbanks to the Canadian border, and Swanson had worked on that.) He came to my office and said, "I've got a couple of railroad bills here that I would like to have somebody sponsor; would you be interested?"

I took them both, and got them passed in 1994. One was simply to authorize \$10,000 for the Department of Transportation to determine how much private property lay within the routes, from Fairbanks to the Canadian border, that had been selected. The other bill was to authorize the identification and construction of a transportation and utility corridor from Fairbanks to the Seward Peninsula, which is where the Bering

Strait tunnel would be. This was to be a transportation-utility corridor, 500 feet wide, and that was called “session legislation,” which means they go into our list of all of the rules and regulations. It has to stay on the books for 50 years, so it is still there; that authorization still remains.

EIR: The legislation called for conducting a survey. Was the survey ever made?

James: No. Nobody authorized any funds for it. There are a lot of people in Alaska who are supportive of this proposal. But generally, they become *not* supportive because it costs money, and they’d rather have that spent in their backyard.

EIR: How would you characterize the area west of Fairbanks, going from Fairbanks to Seward Peninsula? Is it populated very much?

James: No. It is a very small population. There are creek beds, and whatever, that make a natural trail for rail.

EIR: I’m looking at a 2001 book entitled, *Report of the Office of Representative Jeanette James on the Railroad, Transportation, Utility Corridor to Connect Alaska with the Rest of North America*. You have here the history of legislation on the Bering Strait project and/or on building a rail line to the North American rail grid. One thing that I found stunning is that the first piece of legislation you listed in the book is a Senate Joint Resolution #66, in the Alaska legislature, which asserts that “whereas the narrow Bering Straits are the only obstacle to prevent the tying together of the American and Eurasian continents by road, . . . be it resolved that the United States government contact the government of [at that time] the U.S.S.R. to explore interest in constructing a tunnel” across the Strait. This was introduced on March 25, 1965! So there’s been a discussion about building this project, for at least 40 years.

James: That’s true.

EIR: And, then?

James: In the late 1970s, Alaska and others actually did select a rail route from Canada to Fairbanks, but it did not go on to the Bering Strait. That was when Alaska was working with British Columbia and they were bringing the railroad up from Prince George [British Columbia], through the Cassiar area. There is a highway there now, the Cassiar Highway, that is a shortcut down to Prince Rupert, from Whitehorse [Yukon Territory]. That was the way that that railroad went. The problem we ran into in British Columbia, however, is that they have not totally settled all of their tribal [Native American] claims. But there has been some activity and the tribes have selected some of the areas where the route would go through. There are claims yet to be satisfied.

EIR: Starting in 1965, through the late 1970s legislation, and the two pieces of legislation that you introduced in the 1990s,

there has been a pro-development group including you, who have made repeated efforts to construct the rail line.

James: Yes. In 2000, the Federal Congress passed the “Rails to Resources Act.”

EIR: That was signed by President Clinton, in December 2000.

James: We had assistance from then-Sen. Frank Murkowski [R-Alaska, 1981-2002]. He was a big supporter of the rail connection as well. So there was some Federal authorization. . . . It was actually \$6 million all the way, to choose a route to connect the Canadian rail to Fairbanks. During Murkowski’s governorship [2002-06], we had a group of Canadians and Americans that put together a Railroad Working Group, . . . and so a new route has been chosen. I think it is still in the final processes.

EIR: The Alaska-Canada Rail Link.

James: Yes.

EIR: During this time, you introduced House Bill 421 into the Alaska legislature, to undertake that.

James: And I was working as “Railroad Advisor to the Governor,” for four years. In that capacity, I talked to the general public, and I was getting information, and passing it on to the Governor, and attending all the meetings. We would have weekly teleconferences.

It was moving, it was moving. If the Governor had gotten re-elected [in 2006], it wouldn’t have stagnated. But it’s still moving through the University [of Alaska, at Fairbanks].

EIR: What else were you doing as part of this project?

James: We were seeking to build a rail connection from the Yukon to Point McKenzie [near Anchorage], where we would expand a port. We had some meetings with the Chinese as well [in 2006], and they’re very interested in having a better port to bring their products in, that they sell to Canada and the United States. And Point McKenzie is 30 hours closer than the port of Vancouver or Dillingham. Thirty hours closer, coming by ocean, and putting it on a train to various different places, was interesting to them.

EIR: You also wanted to build a petrochemical industry.

James: We wanted to build it in Fairbanks, to take off the liquids—we have a lot of liquids on our natural gas line. But the idea has been very controversial, because the oil companies really want to sell it somewhere else. They don’t want to sell it to us in Alaska, so that’s not been very successful.

But the idea is, we would process the natural gas liquids, and ship them probably to China and other places, processing them into a petrochemical moveable product. [The refined product and petrochemicals] would be another thing that would make lots of traffic for the trains that we want to build. On top of that, for Alaska, if we had those products being

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made here, we could also go into manufacturing if we wanted to.

EIR: This would mean that Alaska would start to develop some basic industry.

James: That is the point. If we have this gas line and everything just goes sailing through Alaska to somewhere else, what's our benefit? We want to get some activities and jobs here in our state.

Here's another thing we found out. The Yukon folks made trips over to China several times, because Yukon has a huge iron prospect just on the border between Yukon and the Northwest Territories. . . . So the Chinese, of course, have a desire to be the biggest steel producers in the world. But they can't produce the steel if they don't have the iron ore. They would be wanting to take out the iron ore and take it to China to make it into steel.

EIR: Now this is in the Yukon Territory?

James: Yes, in the Yukon. But what they do benefits Alaska, because to get to tidewater, they have to come in our direction, over the Alaska railroad.

EIR: There's a huge amount of raw materials in Alaska: zinc, lead, copper, gold and silver, and also molybdenum, platinum, and huge resource deposits of nickel.

James: And something else they call rare earth.

EIR: If the railroad were built, this would start to open up some of these immense resources?

James: Sure. As well, we would anticipate that they would have to bring in [mining] equipment, and the best way to bring it in, is on the train. Then they'd have things to ship out, and the best way to do that is on a train.

EIR: You have said that "Alaska has tremendous mineral resources but they are stranded in the ground."

James: It is true; there is the Pebble Mine, . . . in the southwest of Alaska [in Bristol Bay region]. . . .

EIR: Is this the Pebble Mine that is being blocked by Bob Gillam, a speculative investor, who runs McKinley Capital Management? Reportedly, Gillam is financing the Renewable Resources Coalition, to stop the Pebble Mine from opening.

James: Yes, he is a very rich fellow who has a nice little hide-away for people to go fishing and hunting, a lodge out there.

He is using every bit of his effort to try to stop it. This guy wants to have people come to his lodge and enjoy, and he doesn't want them to look out and see any kind of activities going on there.

EIR: Are several environmental challenges, simply ways of blocking development?

James: I agree that is the case. There may be some places that the environmental damage would be too much, but not generally. Generally, we have been able to modify the ways of doing business so that we don't damage the environment. And rail is the most environmentally friendly way to move people and freight.

EIR: Have groups like the Sierra Club been active in the state?

James: Certainly, they've been here a lot, and Greenpeace.

EIR: Do you know how many jobs the building of the railroad, and associated productive activities, would create?

James: It's not only the railroad bringing jobs, but the other activities that are encouraged because the railroad is there. It opens up an opportunity for other things. I don't know what the number of employees would be, but I'm sure it would be huge.

EIR: In the Bering Strait project, how do you see the question of developing Alaska through opening up, say, goods coming from Russia, and from Asia, and from Europe?

James: When you tell people that, they kind of roll their eyes, and say, "What? What?" It is easy for us to go to the Bering Strait and across the Bering Strait, but you are running into some really deep, deep costs to get any place where you could connect to a railroad in Russia. But the Russians are willing to do it. They're very anxious to, in fact; they even came and wanted to put a pipeline across, and run their gas down this way.

EIR: Lyndon LaRouche has called for constructing a world land-bridge, with high-speed rail development corridors, linking up the entire world by rail, and generating development.

James: Well, I don't know how we get over to the other continents. I think we can go by rail from the tip of North America to the tip of South America, and across the Bering Strait, and then down a long way. But there's no other place to connect the continents, except the Bering Strait.

EIR: At the Suez Canal, you could build a rail bridge or a tunnel.

James: Yes, I suppose that is another place.

EIR: What is your political background?

James: When I was young, I was a Democrat. My father was a Democrat: He said he voted for Hoover, and almost starved to death, so he'd never vote for a Republican again. So, I grew up with him as very active in politics, and a Democrat, so I was as well. I was very active, starting about 15 or 16, when we were making things to send to the people in war, and then I continued to be. We moved to Washington state, after I was married. I always voted and I always managed to get my name on the list to be a precinct worker wherever I lived, and so I was really active. But I was so fed up with the Democratic Party, by 1974, that I just quit; I guess I'll be non-partisan for a while, and I was until 1980, when I changed to be a Republican when Reagan was running.

So, I'm still a Republican, but I'm not happy with anything. I'm very disappointed in politics right now, because people are not making sense; what they're trying to do is say what they think the public wants to hear. . . .

EIR: How do you think one should go about developing Alaska? It has 650,000 people, roughly.

James: Yes, and 365 million acres. Certainly, we have an opportunity here, to do lots and lots of things that we're not doing currently. It's a good place to live.

We do have the capability of manufacturing. The problem is we can't get it to the market, because we don't have the transportation systems that work. We need the trains.

And most of the airports [nationally] are overcrowded, so sending things by air is not necessarily a good way. The waterways are also overwhelmed, the ports are running out of space. We have space here to do lots of things; we can connect the continents and we can connect the world. We can go over the top and get there faster.

EIR: Asia is sending a lot of their goods to the Port of Los Angeles-Long Beach; it's estimated that 25 to 40% of all goods coming into the United States from anywhere in the world, come into the Port of Los Angeles-Long Beach.

James: I understand it's very, very crowded. There's no place to expand.

EIR: Do you think that such an operation on the Bering Strait tunnel and rail project, if it were to be built, would have strategic significance with the United States towards Russia? Do you think it would increase the possibility of collaboration for war avoidance, rather building toward a global showdown?

James: It's very difficult to know how you get into the hearts and minds of men. . . . And the governments of Russia over the years, keep popping back up again. It's hard for me to un-

derstand, even though Russians are very, very smart, dedicated, and wonderful people. We have a whole community of them in Delta Junction [Alaska]. . . . When I was living in Woodburn [Oregon], we had a whole community of them there. . . . But there is a problem when the leaders of people want to be in charge of everybody, and nobody else can do it but them.

EIR: But do you think that this project might be a step towards changing things?

James: Oh, I think so, I think that Russia is very interested in doing this. We should participate with them if we could.

EIR: What principles would you like to guide a world that your grandchildren would grow up in?

James: If we're going to do anything, we have to start with children, and have them understand that you must work and do something productive.

EIR: There's rail as a way of development breaking out all over the world. There's discussion right now of constructing rail lines from South and North Korea to Russia and China. There's also a discussion of a 1,345 kilometer—that's about 900 miles—development corridor from New Delhi to Mumbai. Then there's discussion of a 700-mile line across the Persian Gulf.

James: And they just put a lot more new railroads in Australia as well.

EIR: LaRouche has said, if you can get China, Russia, India, and the United States to work together in the tradition of Franklin Roosevelt, you could start to reconstruct the world.

James: Oh, absolutely.

EIR: If you look at Alaska, much of its development and population is concentrated in the southeast and south central parts of the state. Could you foresee, as the rail project is realized, bigger cities developing all across the state?

James: Oh, I surely think so. Absolutely. I'm an optimist. I think you can do anything you want to. It takes planning and cooperation: it takes these two things.