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Repairing the heart of

CONTRACTORS CONTAIN THE PAIN DURING ROAD REALIGNMENT PROJECT

BY RINDI WHITE

A long-awaited project to ease traffic flow through downtown Fairbanks is nearing completion, and business owners and drivers couldn't be happier.

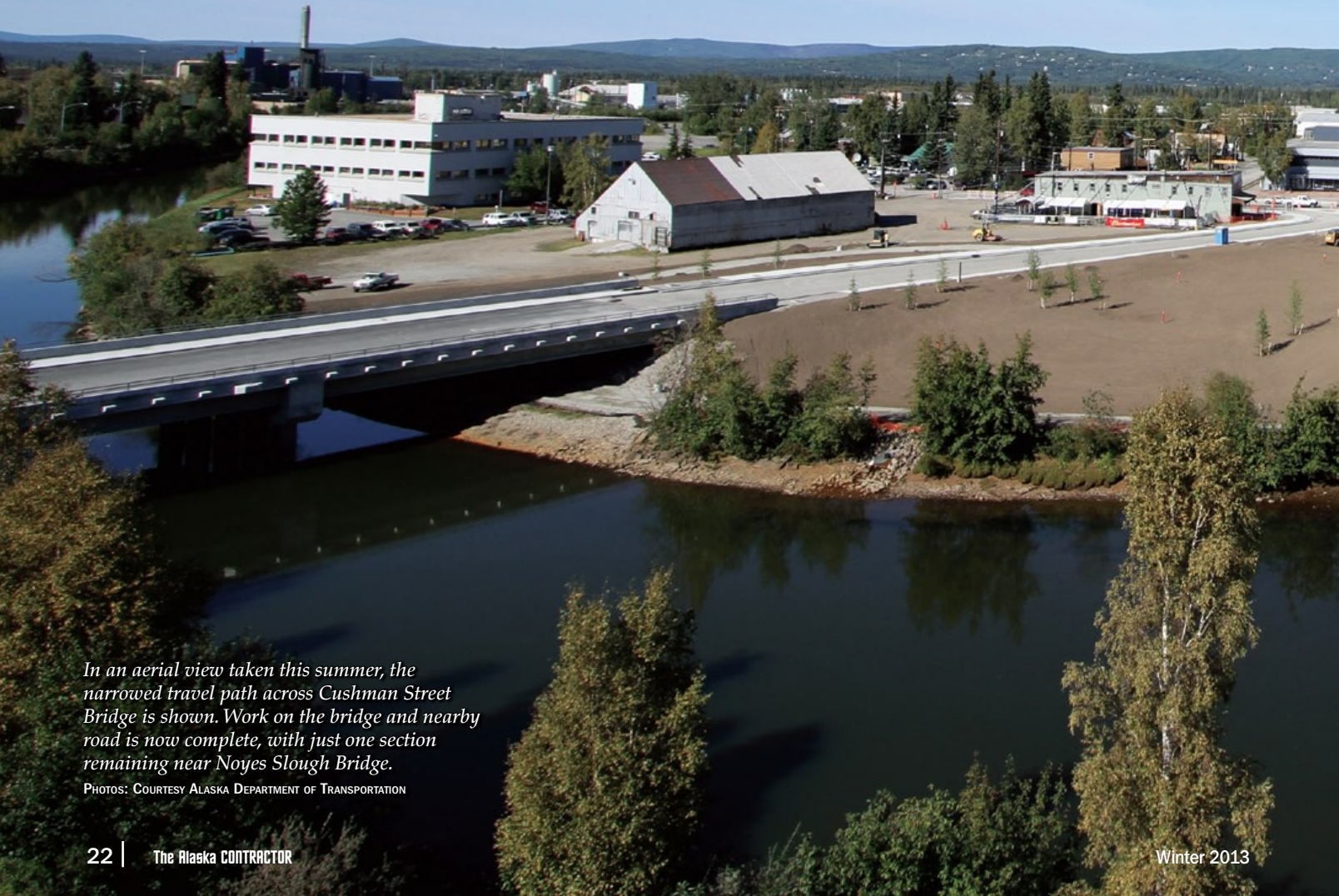
The project realigned Illinois Street, a major connection between College Road and downtown Fairbanks. The street had an S-curve where accidents happened frequently, especially in icy weather. The road also lacked a sidewalk or bike path in areas, so walkers or bikers had to use the shoulder instead of a safer path.

"The real big focus is on making it easier for people to travel around and enjoy," said Alaska Department of Transportation Northern Region spokeswoman Meadow Bailey.

Fairbanks-based H C Contractors Inc., a member of Associated General Contractors of Alaska, is working the \$24 million project. President Bill Hoople said his company got its start in 1993 doing site work including finish grading as well as work on building construction sites. But in recent years his company's focus has turned more toward roads.

H C Contractors built the North Pole Interchange, a \$20 million project, in 2009. That job spanned three construction seasons, Bailey said, and H C handled it well.

"They're very solid. We love that they're so close and they do a great job coordinating with subcontractors," she said. "They're on time, on budget."



In an aerial view taken this summer, the narrowed travel path across Cushman Street Bridge is shown. Work on the bridge and nearby road is now complete, with just one section remaining near Noyes Slough Bridge.

PHOTOS: COURTESY ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Fairbanks

Excavating history

The roughly mile-long project has been in the works for about 30 years, Bailey said. Part of the reason it languished was that, in addition to straightening Illinois Street, widening the road meant demolishing buildings, moving businesses and a massive effort to coordinate with utility companies to move their lines.

Nine businesses were relocated, including Samson's Hardware, R&S Machine Shop, Hot Tamale and One Stop Auto. Seven businesses were demolished, including two apartment complexes.

Amid all that change, the project required the road to be completely dug up so utilities could be relocated underground.



A paving crew from H C Contractors Inc. lays asphalt on the Illinois Street project this summer.





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"The project was really invasive to businesses and the traveling public throughout the summer," Bailey said, adding that holes 10 to 15 feet deep were dug all along the project for the utility relocation effort. More than 20 subcontractors were involved in the job, making proper scheduling key to things working smoothly.

"The big thing was, with how many people were involved in the project, keeping the communication going," said H C Contractor's project manager Travis Malin. "It all comes down to the communication and having a good team to work with. When you have that many subcontractors and they all want to get to work, (you have) to do it in a coordinated effort so it's fluid and each phase happens behind the next."

Malin said with all the excavation work, they found a few things buried that they didn't expect — like some old logs under the road that looked like they were an old crib-style leach field. There were plenty of abandoned utilities, some abandoned pipes from Fairbanks' gold-mining days. A few personal belongings were unearthed, he said — mostly bottles, boots and general trash. No one's abandoned pile of gold nuggets was found — at least not that he knew of, he joked.

Downtown disruption

The most challenging aspect of the Illinois Street project, Malin and Bailey said, was the fact that the work cut through Fairbanks' busy downtown. Communication with businesses, clear and simple traffic detours and constant updates were essential to the project.

"We worked really hard to communicate with the businesses, starting two years ago," Bailey said. "We tried to keep the detour as stable as we could, so you knew you were always going to have a northbound detour going through there."

Still, having a major road project happening next door wasn't easy for some businesses.

"To encapsulate our members' experience of it, some folks were having an incredibly hard year, DOT's best efforts notwithstanding," said David van den Berg, executive director of the Downtown Association of Fairbanks.

Van den Berg said some businesses that weren't in the middle of the

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construction zone did OK and others did more poorly than anticipated, likely because some potential customers simply avoided the area altogether because of the project. But he applauded the DOT and H C Contractors for working with the businesses as much as possible and for responding when some aspects, like signs, needed to be improved.

The biggest help to businesses, he said, was the decision by the DOT and H C Contractors to get the largest part of the project wrapped up this year instead of disrupting downtown two years in a row.

"That, at least put businesses in a good position for next year," he said. "I give them a lot of credit for not taking their time in the first six weeks of the project. They were pushing the pace in the beginning, and that led them to get further ahead by year end."

Malin said the project initially called for work to continue downtown for two years. But H C and DOT worked together, and he developed "a very aggressive schedule" to complete the largest chunk of the work in one year, so businesses would be less disrupted.

John Jackovich, owner of the Big "I," an Irish pub and lounge and perhaps the oldest bar in Fairbanks, said he's very happy the bulk of the project is done.


His bar was ground zero for the construction work. At one point, three sides of his building had all been opened up for the project, he said. Jackovich, who took over ownership of the bar in 2006, said he's been working to boost business. This year didn't help his business much, he said, but he's planning for a big year in 2013.

"I couldn't say enough about how it all went, but I've got to tell you, for me it was like treading water," Jackovich said.

To help other downtown businesses and get the project completed with less disruption, the road crew worked Saturdays. But Saturdays are key for the bar business, Jackovich said.

"We took a hit," he said. But he's optimistic that he'll get back on track in 2013. He's planning the "Big Eyelid" party, he said, celebrating the fact that the construction is over and his is one of just a few businesses left standing in that area.

"We're going to give a big go this summer," he said.



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An H C Contractors crew excavates Barnette Street, which connects to the new Veterans Memorial Bridge. The work was part of the Illinois Street project in Fairbanks this summer.

PHOTO: COURTESY H C CONTRACTORS INC.

One more piece left

Bailey said the project would be free of traffic restrictions until work begins on the last part of the project in the spring. The Noyes Slough Bridge will be replaced, she said, and southbound traffic will be diverted around the project. Northbound traffic will be able to travel through, she said.

"Everything will be completed except the north section," she said. "It won't have the same impact at all as summer 2012."

Rindi White is a writer who lives in Alaska.



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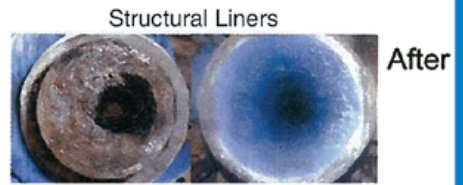
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