



Senator Con Bunde

Alaska State Legislature
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Dear Neighbors,

The legislative session, while occasionally frustrating, always remains interesting. Along with intense Senate Finance work and chairing the Senate Labor and Commerce Committee, I introduced new personal legislation on multiple issues.

I sponsored SB 100, the Senate companion bill for HB 249. SB 100 and HB 249 are acts relating to Enhanced 911 systems. Enhanced 911 (E-911) systems have been dramatically improving public safety across the nation. This bill allows municipalities across the state to collect the revenue they need to implement and maintain this public safety tool. HB 249 passed the House and Senate. The need for this bill was identified when a shooting occurred in our district and peace officers were unable to establish the location of the victim for over an hour.

I also sponsored SB 95, the Senate companion bill for HB 124. The bill allows public safety officers to use reasonable force to collect an oral sample for inclusion into the DNA registration system from a person required to submit a sample under current state law. HB 124 was signed into law on May 5, 2005.

I introduced SB 112, an act that provides unorganized areas of the state a mechanism to contribute locally to their schools via a head tax. The legislature serves as the local government for areas that choose not to organize. There are 19 rural school districts that do not offer a local contribution to their schools. The Alaska Department of Revenue estimates that residents living in these areas earned an income of over \$500 million in fiscal year 2004. The tax is not levied on those living at or below the poverty line, disabled vets or senior citizens. It will provide the schools within Regional Education Attendance Areas with an estimated \$11 million in the first year. These funds will be distributed in *addition* to state and federal education funds. The heart of this bill goes back to the ideals that the State of Alaska Constitution is founded on. Article 1, Section 1, reads, in part "...that all persons are equal and entitled to equal rights, opportunities, and protection under the law; and that all persons have corresponding obligations to the people and the State".

This year SB 87, allowing enforcement of our current seatbelt law, passed the Senate. Twenty-one other states have made failure to wear a seat belt a primary offense. This legislation provides a 10-15% increase in seat belt use. As a result, the lives of 6-7 Alaskan drivers will be saved in the first year of implementation. This bill is now in the House.

I also worked on two other important pieces of legislation this session, SB 134 and SB 166. SB 134 requires the Police Standards Council to create standards for investigations, reportings and submissions pertaining to sexual assault cases that are forwarded to the District Attorney's office.

The council will have the power to investigate complaints and if necessary, discipline, reprimand or revoke an officer's certification. Currently, sexual assault victims have no direct method to question the process police officers followed to investigate a crime committed against them. Across the U.S., states have charged task forces to create minimum standards and protocol for sexual assault investigations. In addition, I will be working with law enforcement to ensure Sexual Assault Response Teams (SARTs) are more available for communities across Alaska.

SB 166 requires individuals who participate in a tour or recreational service that provides an opportunity to view public wildlife in Alaska to purchase a \$5 wildlife conservation tag. Currently, the State of Alaska spends significant resources to manage fish and wildlife. Existing law requires hunters, fishermen and other consumptive users of fish and wildlife to buy licenses and to pay additional taxes, but does not assess a fee for non-consumptive uses of fish and wildlife such as wildlife viewing. This bill will bring in between \$2 and 3 million annually. Those funds are intended for wildlife conservation efforts and programs.

Finally, I introduced SB 193. This legislation allows municipalities to adopt a property tax deferral program. The program permits a homeowner to defer payment of property taxes if they have lived in the residence for a minimum of 10 years and are living at or below the federal poverty guidelines. The tax will not be due until the ownership of the home is transferred to another individual. This will prevent the municipalities from taxing Alaskans out of their homes.

The legislation listed above and all other legislation is an ongoing process and bills often change as they go through the legislative committee process.

I have enjoyed my work and the challenges this session and look forward to continuing my efforts for you in the 2006 Legislative Session. As always, I am able to best represent you when we are in communication. Please contact me with your views on the issues above and any other challenges you feel Alaska faces.

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SPECIAL SESSION NEWS

As many of you may be aware, I was not in Juneau for the Special Session as I had returned to Anchorage at the end of the regular session to be with my wife while she faced some surgery in her battle with cancer. Although I was not in Juneau, I was in daily contact with Senate members and took part in the discussions of the main issues of the session. While the special session was far more protracted than I thought necessary, I do think that both the reform of the state retirement system and workers' compensation were of the magnitude that they needed to be addressed this year.

SB 141 THE PERS/TERS DEBATE

One of the most important pieces of legislation to come out of the first year of the 24th Legislature is Senate Bill 141 – PERS/TRS. This bill has generated a great deal of controversy and confusion.

First, it is important to know that current employees will not have any reductions to their retirement benefits. In fact, Alaska's Constitution prohibits reducing retirement benefits of anyone currently vested in the system. Any changes to the PERS/TRS system would only apply to those hired after the law goes into effect. While change can be threatening, I think the fact that many employees were hired under the Tier II and III systems is an indication Alaska will still attract talented teachers and other state employees under a Tier IV system.

In 1975, there were 20,000 employed members of PERS/TRS and 1,200 retirees in the system. Last year, there were 43,000 employees and 28,000 retirees. If this ratio continues on this course, the current system cannot sustain itself. Currently, we have a \$5.7 billion and growing deficit in the PERS/TRS system. Meanwhile, the state funds needed to cure this deficit are not available for other needed state services. For these reasons I don't think further delay is in the best interest of Alaska.

Folk wisdom suggests that the first thing you do when you find yourself in a hole is to stop digging.

SENATE LABOR AND COMMERCE COMMITTEE NEWS

SB 130 Workers Compensation: The Senate Labor and Commerce Committee spent several weeks hearing testimony from injured workers, the medical community, insurers, division heads and businesses. No one disagreed that workers comp rates have skyrocketed in the past few years and are threatening the livelihood of Alaskan businesses. The task before us was curtailing these increases.

The committee sponsored a companion bill to HB 257 that brings efficiencies to the state procurement system. The current system is under a pilot program with a private contractor that specializes in e-commerce tools for efficient delivery of services. This bill allows the pilot program to extend through 2009. It also allows state employees to purchase e-commerce software of their own and run a parallel program. In 2009, the two programs will be analyzed/audited by a third party to determine the cost savings of these ordering systems.

The committee also sponsored a companion bill to HB 182 that clarified the wage and hour statute for Alaskan businesses on overtime computation. This bill removed the laborious and impossible to track "80/20 test" to determine overtime. Instead, HB 182 simply outlines that if an employee is in a supervisory position and makes two times the minimum wage, he or she does not qualify for overtime pay. This clarification will end the current litigation over these wage conflicts. It also allows for more workers to move into supervisory positions that typically offer more benefits to employees. This bill passed both bodies and is on its way to be signed by the Governor.

WINTER 2005 SURVEY QUESTIONS

Here's what some of your neighbors and fellow voters are thinking:

Question #1 - Currently, the State of Alaska's governor appoints its Attorney General. Do you agree with this method or would you prefer that we make that post an elected position?

Appointed - 48%

Elected - 48%

Undecided - 4%

Question #2 - The Permanent Fund Corporation is continuing their request for the legislature to adopt the POMV plan. Do you support the POMV plan?

Yes - 66%

No - 22%

Undecided - 12%

Question #3 - I believe that Alaska should have a constitutional spending cap to contain spending. Do you agree?

Yes - 64%

No - 30%

Undecided - 6%

Question #4 - Do you support a "head tax" for adult residents of Rural Education Attendance Areas? This would require that residents of unorganized boroughs, who are not currently contributing to their local schools, annually pay the equivalent of what the average resident in organized boroughs contributes.

Yes - 77%

No - 18%

Undecided - 5%

Question #5 - Alaska PERS/TRS is approaching a funding crisis. The governor has proposed a \$100 million temporary fix for the next year to help bridge the gap while we consider funding options. One option is to create a 4th "tier". Do you support that idea?

Yes - 59%

No - 21%

Undecided - 20%

Question #6 - Should the State of Alaska own part of the proposed gas line?

Yes - 55%

No - 25%

Undecided - 20%

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