

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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House Approves Operating Budget Controls Spending and Maintains Vital Services

(JUNEAU) – The Alaska House of Representatives approved the [operating budget for Fiscal Year 2004](#) by a vote of 27 to 11 on Thursday. The \$2.3 billion budget restores some funding to proposed cuts; however, House Finance Committee Co-Chairs Rep. John Harris (R-Valdez) and Rep. Bill Williams (R-Saxman) said the House must take frugal measures in frugal times.

“As Alaska seeks new revenue, we in the Legislature must exhibit self-control in state spending,” Harris said. “This budget shows that while we preserve the programs the state needs, we respect our limited source of funding.”

“We must show fiscal responsibility and make reductions that are not necessarily the most popular,” Williams said. “However, we also know that fiscal responsibility means ensuring some services remain for the people, no matter how difficult our situation becomes.”

Among the major restorations in general funding:

- \$45 million will preserve the Longevity Bonus
- \$11 million will return full funding to pupil transportation
- \$9 million in Learning Opportunity Grants will complete K-12 education
- \$200,000 will restore most funding to Independent Living Rehabilitation

Rep. Mike Hawker (R-Anchorage) chaired the Health and Social Services subcommittee on the House Finance Committee. He said that the entire Legislature should consider the importance of the Longevity Bonus to the Alaskans who receive it.

“Plenty of Alaska seniors have made this bonus a part of their fixed income,” Hawker said. “The Longevity Bonus must receive a full and fair hearing before the Legislature and the public.”

(MORE)

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With Learning Opportunity Grants included, more than \$709 million will fully fund K-12 education. Pupil transportation also receives full funding at a total of almost \$54 million. Finance member Rep. Kevin Meyer (R-Anchorage), who supervises the education subcommittee, said the Finance Committee struck a balance between what the state needs and what current funding will support.

“Education is an area that can always use more money, but funding is finite,” Meyer said. “These restorations to the Learning Opportunity Grants and to bus service show that we are stretching the state’s finances as far as possible.”

Harris and Williams agreed that the budget process has plenty of challenges and that only a unified House can pass the budget in a timely manner. They credited the Majority for standing by the decisions of the Finance Committee.

“We can no longer afford to be everything to everybody,” Williams said. “We must live within our means.”

“Of course we all have programs that we want to see receive more money,” Harris said. “But if we all hold out for our individual interests, nothing will get done.”

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