

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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Charlie Huggins Senator

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By Senator Charlie Huggins

The City of Juneau's plan to replace the Capitol building is stirring up a debate as old as statehood. Do we leave it in Juneau or move it to a place where it can serve the vast majority of Alaskans? The old argument that it's cheaper to leave the Capitol in Juneau is being made again.

What always gets overlooked when that point is made is the fact that for all practical purposes, we really have two state Capitol regions already, one in Juneau and another in the south-central area of Anchorage, Eagle River, and Mat-Su.

Alaskans should not assume that lawmakers just drop their legislative responsibilities when the session ends in May, because our work is a year-round job. Committee hearings, news conferences, and any other legislative business that requires lawmakers to come together all takes place at the Anchorage/Eagle River/Mat-Su Legislative Information Offices (LIOs).

The official building in Juneau is only used to conduct the state's business during the 120-day legislative session. With the exception of the Governor's office, three Juneau lawmakers and a handful of staffers, the building literally sits empty for the remainder of the year.

Constantly moving back and forth between the two Capitol regions forces the entire Anchorage/Eagle River and Mat-Su legislative delegations – 20 Representatives and 10 Senators and at least twice that many staff members – to pack up and move twice a year. That includes their computers, files and office equipment. With the exception of the personal moving expenses of the staff members, which they pay for out-of-pocket, every dollar of the relocation is paid for by the state.

I would bet that not many Alaskans have added up the staggering long-term costs for this annual journey – but I have. It is just one more reason to locate a new Capitol building in the Mat-Su area, a move that will save the state millions of dollars in the years ahead and open up the legislative session to the vast majority of Alaskans.

Let's start with what the state pays for the three south-central LIOs. The annual lease payment for the Anchorage LIO totals \$624,000 a year. Another \$120,000 a year is spent for the Mat-Su LIO, and the \$25,000 for the Eagle River LIO. Relocating the State Capitol to south-central Alaska will save the state nearly a million dollars a year just in lease payments.

A significant number of legislator-owned vehicles are shipped to Juneau at approximately \$1,000 per vehicle round trip. An additional \$14,000 is spent on shipping computers, office equipment and files from the south-central LIOs to Juneau and back. There are also hidden expenses, or expenses that are harder to quantify but equally costly. For example, a lot of wear and tear is inflicted on the computers and office equipment when they are dismantled and shipped across the state twice a year.

Although there will still be the cost of moving lawmakers and equipment from several other regions of the state, those costs can be significantly reduced simply because it's cheaper to get to and from the south-central region of the state.

I believe Alaskans overwhelmingly support a state Capitol on the road network in the south-central region, principally in the Mat-Su Valley. Our citizens understand the overriding importance of having the legislative process readily accessible to the average Alaskan. It is unreasonable to believe or expect our citizens to pay \$1,200 to \$1,500 to fly to Juneau and participate in their state government.

The bottom line is this. My fellow Alaskans have this one right; the State Capitol's rightful location is near the population center on the road network. My good friend, Don Loesche, of Big Lake, says it best, "Put the Capitol near Willow!" Spending \$100 million for a new Capitol building in Juneau is 'dead on arrival'.