

The Alaska State House of Representative's Perspective on the Governor's Special Session Proposal – HB 3002

By Representative Brian Porter, Speaker of the House, June 26, 2002

HB 3002 proposed by the Governor in the Special Session is a simple appropriation bill. It does nothing for veterans that would not be available to any other Alaskan who has attained the age of 65. It proposes an additional \$5.7 million expenditure for Pioneers Homes and would add approximately 130 new state employees.

The Governor's proposal is to add additional staff to the Pioneers Homes and only by the law of averages might it provide services for more veterans. The proposal does not and will not provide any preferences for veterans.

While a case can be made for added expenditures of state resources for many specific causes, this must be taken in context of our entire state budget. There are many worthy issues that we would like to fund. However, as we all know the "hold the line" budget we authorized for Fiscal Year 2003 will require a draw of over \$800,000,000 from the state's savings.

In the context of a budget that holds the line on general fund expenditures, this clearly recognizes that seniors have a priority over many other activities we have had to constrain.

The federal government will need to pass legislation to conduct a pilot program to provide benefits to veterans who are living in our Pioneers Homes. The state legislature passed legislation preparing the state to participate in this pilot program. We passed the companion legislation in spite of doubts that the Veterans Administration actually would bring forth to the Congress the legislation the Knowles Administration was promising.

It appears that Senator Murkowski's proposal for securing capital expansion or renovation funds is the most likely prospect for enabling veterans in Pioneers Homes to receive the federal benefits to which they are entitled. Thus, waiting until this federal legislation moves to fruition makes sense. After the decisions on how capital expenditures will be made in context of existing and new programs in the Pioneers Homes, the Legislature will have the information necessary to make critical funding decisions.

The issue of increasing the expenditures in our Pioneers Homes was addressed during the extensive consideration and adoption of the FY 03 Operating Budget. The issue of participating in a federal government pilot program to secure federal benefits for veterans in Pioneers Homes is in place. Further action on capital renovation or expansion of Pioneers Homes must wait until the federal government decides if they will modify their capital allocation program for veterans' homes. Thus, the House of Representatives will not be taking up the appropriation bill requested by the governor.

In the interim, the legislature will continue with a \$250,000 study by the Legislative Budget and Audit Committee on the feasibility of a stand-alone veterans' home that is funded in section 27 of Senate Bill 2006.