

Compass Piece

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We Alaskans take pride in our can-do spirit. When a need is identified, we call ourselves to action, take up whatever tools are necessary, and accomplish the required task. We have learned that to wait for others to act on our behalf is not a wise course. We know too, it is not only our right, but our obligation to act in our own best interest.

This fact of Alaskan life was codified to law in 1958, with the passage of the Statehood Act; whereby the federal government ceded land and mineral rights to Alaska for the singular purpose of establishing an economic base from which to provide for ourselves. This precept was given so seriously that along with land grants, came a stern warning: if Alaska were to relinquish its mineral rights, the land and minerals could be forfeited back to the federal government. Those mineral rights include, of course, natural gas.

The drafters of the Alaska State Constitution also recognized the importance our natural resources would play in the future economy of the state and our ability to provide for ourselves. They included stipulations that place the responsibility for the provision of resource development squarely on the legislature. They also understood the dangerous possibility that Alaska's interests might be subordinated, and ultimately crafted the language in article 8, section 2 which reads, "The Legislature shall provide for the utilization development and conservation of all natural resources belonging to the State, including lands and waters, for the maximum benefit of its people."

Those words carry a heavy responsibility: we Alaskans are obligated to do no less than utilize our resources in a manner consistent with our own best interest; even if our best interest is separate from that of say Exxon or BP. The words are particularly important today. At a time when Alaska's economy is stagnant. At a time when our ability to adequately fund education, infrastructure and the very future of our state is questionable. At this time, we Alaskans must accept the responsibility of managing our resources for our maximum benefit.

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As we attempt to fulfill this responsibility, we must necessarily determine the value attendant to each of the range of commodity resources available to us. After careful consideration, it becomes readily apparent: no other resource commodity of consequence comes close to the positive effects as those associated with the commercialization of natural gas.

The value of natural gas as a resource commodity must not be underestimated. The direct economic benefit of natural gas will be equivalent to oil. The added benefits: more reasonably priced energy throughout much of the state, substantial economic growth, diversity and opportunity, will add significantly to the real value of natural gas.

We Alaskans have the responsibility to call ourselves to action; and we who legislate have the responsibility to demand that an economically viable means to transport this huge commodity resource be manifested. We must do so in a manner consistent with the efficiencies of the free enterprise system which we must protect; recognizing that either an overwhelming governmental presence or private sector monopoly destroy that system. We must recognize that the provision of basic infrastructure for commodity transportation is our responsibility, and will only enhance the free enterprise system.

We cannot wait, and wish, and hope that the three major oil producers in Alaska, Exxon, BP, and Phillips, will do for us what we are obligated to do, and therefore must do, for ourselves.

Our greatest risk is not that we will make a wrong decision. Our greatest risk is that we will make no decision. Careful consideration and recognition of realistic economics will keep us from making a bad decision; lack of vision and lack of political courage will keep us from making any decision. We Alaskans need a call to action. And for this reason, we must recognize that if we are to act in our own best interest, we have no choice but to seriously consider, now, State ownership of an Alaskan natural gas pipeline system. The time for action is now!