

**SPONSOR STATEMENT
HOUSE BILL 1
LEGISLATIVE SESSION LOCATION
By Representatives Norman Rokeberg and Joe Green**

TITLE: "An Act relating to the location of legislative sessions; and providing for an effective date."

House Bill 1 calls for the legislature to convene in the Municipality of Anchorage beginning in 2004. HB 1 does not propose to move the capital; it only addresses where the legislature meets.

The majority of Alaska's population lives well away from the current committee hearings, floor sessions, and daily business of the legislature. Access to legislators is limited to only those Alaskans who can afford the expensive and arduous travel to Juneau. Special interest groups, lobbyists, and individuals with the financial means can access the legislature in its current remote location, but representative government demands that legislators hear from the majority of the citizens, not just the wealthy. No other state in the Union requires 95% of its legislators to relocate to a capitol inaccessible by road, thereby drastically reducing the potentially available pool of young legislators with families. The statewide teleconference system is a necessary improvement, but insufficient solution to this problem.

The Anchorage area offers the advantages of access, including superior transportation access by road, rail, or air; superior commercial office space available at competitive rates; larger and more varied residential space for legislators and staff; and a larger labor pool from which to draw professional and clerical staff. There are also outstanding visitor facilities for individuals and groups doing business with the legislature. Both the private and public sector will realize savings from such relocation.

The legislature is presently housed in an obsolete building, constructed in 1931. The State Capitol and surrounding parking are grossly inadequate and were not constructed for the primary purpose of conducting today's legislative activities. The building is clearly unsafe as it violates numerous life-safety and building codes. It does not have an automatic sprinkler system for fire suppression, has antiquated electrical service, fails to meet structural requirements for earthquakes, contains countless fire code violations, does not provide adequate access for the disabled community, and is inefficiently laid out and expensive to maintain and operate.

In Anchorage, where the bulk of the legislators live and conduct their business during the legislative interim, a leased building provides year round offices for 19 House members, 10 Senate members, the Ethics Committee, and the Anchorage Legislative Information Office. In addition, it is interesting to note that some legislators from rural areas also have their interim staff housed in the Anchorage Legislative Office Building.

Suitable premises for the chambers and associated office premises are or will be available in the Anchorage commercial real estate market. The cost of refitting the premises and constructing suitable chambers could be bargained for as part of the leasehold obligation.

There is concern regarding the potential loss of jobs in Juneau. This could be offset by Juneau's economy hosting more private businesses: tourism, timber, fishing, mining, etc., on a year-round basis rather than for only four to five months a year. There would still be a continued presence of the Executive branch of government. In the short term, the economy in Juneau may feel the effects of a legislative move, but a majority of Alaskans would benefit during the long term. It must be realized that the Juneau area is home to some of the best fishing, timber, and mining opportunities in the state -- if these opportunities could be accessed. Such natural resource industries could provide high-paying, long-term jobs. Juneau, the town mostly built on old mine tailings, now seems to have a problem letting a mine open and/or operate. Commercial fishing seems to be a thing of the past as most of the vessels tied up in the harbor appear to be pleasure-type craft, not the old work horses of the sea. A modest timber industry could certainly appear feasible in a proper regulatory environment.

In the most recent municipal election, by approximately 84 votes, the voters of Juneau defeated a proposal to connect Juneau to the Alaska Highway. Enhanced ferry service was the winner but the majority of Alaskans would like to be able to access their capital city without the extra costs of ferry or other transportation means. A road into Juneau would allow more people to visit Juneau on their schedule -- rather than that of the ferry or airline. Access to our legislature needs to be cost-effective and delivery of democracy to the majority of our citizens should be the highest priority of state policy.

Session per diem rates would be favorably impacted as well as the legislature's travel budget. Currently only three legislators are being paid at the lower per diem rate. By meeting in Anchorage more than 10 times as many legislators would be paid at this lower rate. In addition, tremendous moving costs could be avoided since more than half of the legislators live in, or commute to, Anchorage.

All in all, moving the legislative session to Anchorage would give the largest number of citizens the most access to their legislators. Your support of this legislation would be appreciated.

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