

Alaska State Legislature Majority News



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – May 11, 2004

**CONTACT: Senate President Gene Therriault, 465-4797
House Speaker Pete Kott, 465-3777**

Legislature Wraps Up Twenty-Third Session ***Education, Victim's Rights, Natural Gas Pipeline Top Issues***

(Juneau)— The Twenty-Third Legislature concluded Tuesday with an \$82 million boost to K-12 education, steps taken to begin resolving the State's navigable waters disputes, measures in place to advance the State's interest in building a natural gas pipeline, and progress toward expanding its economic development opportunities.

"In addition to the education funding, I'm pleased with the regulatory streamlining and the State's rights package that was passed this year," said Senate President Gene Therriault (R-North Pole). "The State's rights measures in particular are very important to the economic future of Alaska."

House Speaker Pete Kott (R-Eagle River) said, "For the last four months we have focused our energies on educating Alaska's youth, encouraging responsible resource development and laying the foundation for a stable fiscal future." He went on to say, "From the many divergent political philosophies we found ways to work together within the House and with our colleagues in the Senate. It's been an honor to work with the leadership of the state in serving the people of Alaska."

The State began reaping the rewards of the Legislature's re-authorization and revision last year of the Alaska Stranded Gas Development Act. The State has accepted two applications to negotiate fiscal and other terms to build a natural gas pipeline. The Legislature passed a bill to appropriate \$1.65 million to the Department of Revenue for work related to bringing North Slope natural gas to market, with \$650,000 of that going to the Alaska Natural Gas Development Authority, created by a voter-approved citizens' initiative in the 2002 general election. Additional money was added in other appropriation bills to keep this important project on track.

The State has also formally agreed to help the Alaska Gasline Port Authority, a joint effort of the city of Valdez and the Fairbanks North Star Borough, facilitate development and construction of a pipeline that will commercialize stranded North Slope gas.

The Legislature also continued to implement recommendations from the Joint Legislative Salmon Industry Task Force created in 2002 to address multiple challenges of the depressed commercial salmon industry.

The Legislature renamed Child Support Services and made both criminal nonsupport and aiding and abetting nonpayment of child support felonies. The legislation would also give the child support services agency the authority to forgive a percentage of state debt.

Among the legislative priorities this year was the issue of victims' rights. Too often, when the system concentrates on the accused, the victim is readily forgotten. With a slate of bills aimed at addressing this

oversight, the Republican Majority has made the victim's interests a priority in our state's criminal justice system.

As part of a "Standing Up for Alaska's Lands Rights" package, the Legislature passed measures to move the state closer to resolving ownership and management of the state's navigable waters and public access rights. The bills address more than 60 million acres of land at stake because of the slow pace of the federal government to concede navigability determinations.

The Legislature also took steps to achieve a more efficient, timely and fair administrative hearing process. The culmination of many year's efforts, the bills are intended to ensure a better quality, less costly and less time-consuming process for writing regulations and appealing decisions of a State agency.

A bipartisan group of legislators worked successfully to compel the Northern Alaskan Environmental Center to withdraw its appeal of Tech-Pogo, Inc.'s National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permit. Their efforts ensured that Alaskans are working and resource development in our state is alive, well and open for business.

Therriault and Kott pointed to the major accomplishments of the Twenty-Third Legislature in areas most important to Alaskans:

Education

- Increased K-12 public education funding by \$82 million.
- Increased University of Alaska funding by \$15.8 million, including \$5.8 million for the public employees' and teachers' retirement systems.

Victim's Rights

- Created Domestic Violence Fatality Review Teams in municipalities throughout Alaska, designed to analyze and review the facts surrounding domestic abuse fatalities.
- Required judges to order that restitution be paid to victims who have suffered a financial loss.
- Allowed prosecutors to use prior suppressed statements and evidence to cross-examine defendants who have changed their story.
- Required police and prosecutors to notify crime victims of the Alaska Office of Victim's Rights.
- Closed the loophole in current law that requires that defense attorneys or defense investigators obtain consent from the parents of minors that they want to question, whether the interview is tape recorded or not. Under current law, parental consent is only required for interviews that are recorded.

Health

- SeniorCare will provide prescription drug subsidies or cash assistance to low-income seniors until the new Medicare prescription drug subsidy administered by the federal government becomes fully effective in 2006.
- Extends the Special Education Service Agency for another nine years. Enables remote districts and communities that do not have local specialists to meet the needs of the local children with disabilities by employing professionals with specializations in various disabilities.

Resource/Economic Development

- Authorized the Alaska Railroad to delineate a transportation and utility corridor from Eielson AFB to the Canadian border, and to investigate extending the railroad to connect with the North American rail system.
- Allowed the Railroad Corporation to issue up to \$500 million in tax-free revenue bonds, which would be secured through federal Department of Defense funds, to pay for extending a rail line to Delta Junction and Fort Greely.
- Changed the tax structure of the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute.
- Reduced the Fisheries Business Tax rate for fishermen who sell their own catch from 5 percent to 3 percent, encouraging small-business Alaskan fishermen to process and sell their own fish.
- Modified the salmon enhancement tax to include additional tax rates.
- Provided operational flexibility for regional aquaculture associations.

- Allowed for the development of a new and relatively untapped resource: coal bed methane. It is the goal of this legislature to drill for coal bed methane while protecting the environment by bringing this new resource under the same guidelines as the rest of the highly successful and safe development industry.

###