

2021 CAPITOL CURRENTS

32nd Alaska State Legislature ~ 1st Session

Third Edition

~ Senate gets busy. House makes a little progress ~

HIGHLIGHTS

If at first, you don't succeed, try try again - and again.

After repeated deadlocked attempts to elect a House Speaker Pro Tem, both sides finally settled on 26-year-old independent newcomer, [Rep. Josiah Patkotak](#) from Utqiagvik.

The vote was 39-0. Lt. Governor Meyer is off the hook. Rep Patkotak now presides over the House until there's a formal organization. The Speaker Pro Tem leads Floor sessions. Committee assignments and bill introductions still await organization.

Former Speaker Bryce Edgemon said it could be a while before they figure it all out. The final deal may be a very different animal, including the possibility of R and D committee co-chairs.

The Senate approved [SCR 1](#), 19-0. This resolution would allow remote voting if needed during the pandemic, another tool in the COVID toolbox. Lawmakers could attend a session by teleconference, if approved by the House Speaker or Senate President. It's been transmitted to the House.

[SB 56](#), the Governor's proposed Alaska Disaster Act, was heard in Senate Health and Social Services (SHSS) on the 2nd and 4th. It proposes to extend the current coronavirus public health disaster emergency through September 2021. SHSS Chair Wilson is in favor of the bill. SHSS will take **Public Testimony on Tuesday, February 9th**.

It is already on the Senate Labor and Commerce (SL&C) schedule pending referral.

Governor Dunleavy's efforts are under fire for a variety of reasons. Senator Reinbold opposes the bill and stridently questions the wisdom and constitutionality of the Declaration, also mentioning lockdowns and school closures that she thinks have done more harm than good.

Senators Hughes (Majority Leader) and Costello (Chair L&C) say the case simply hasn't been made for an extension all the way to September. Senate President Micciche thinks the Governor has more explaining to do before he can support the additional time.

Senators Begich, Kiehl and others support the extension but worry about executive overreach on previous extensions that didn't receive legislative approval.

Without legislative action, the current Declaration is set to expire on February 14th. Top health professionals, hospitals, nursing homes and seniors are urging speedy passage. There is some general public opposition from folks ready to move on. In any event, the bill is stalled for now which may mean trouble.

Note: The Declaration has nothing to do with local restrictions and mask mandates, which the state doesn't enforce. It provides the authority for the state's COVID orders, like travel restrictions and seafood protocols; and includes flexibility for medical facilities to respond and deliver the vaccine.

Senate State Affairs (SSTA) Chair Senator Shower kicked off a review of [SB39](#), his bill to change election laws. Expect spirited debate on this one as they struggle to balance ballot security against voter access. The bill is scheduled for a **hearing in SSTA Tuesday at 3:30pm**.

Meanwhile the Senate Finance Committee (SFIN) has been reviewing the Governor's proposed budget with a focus on expenses and revenues. It calls for \$259 million in reductions this year (\$400 million over two years), a bond package and big dividends.

But, President Micciche says there is growing acceptance that a comprehensive fiscal package could mean smaller dividends and new taxes. He doesn't hear people talking anymore about cutting our way to a balanced budget. Senator Stedman doesn't think we can cut \$400 million in two years.

The Finance Committee hopes to have a final operating budget by mid-March.

Senator Hoffman, a veteran finance committee member, thinks the PFD will be the top issue this year. He reminds us that voters may have spoken when they dumped incumbents who supported lower dividends. He's looking at a minimum of \$1,000 checks.

The Administration announced the return of Alaska's government online spending database - coming soon after final testing of fixes to improve internal controls. It's been down for almost a year leaving citizens, watchdogs, and legislators without key information about state spending.

Coincidentally, [SB25](#) by Senator Wielechowski also was heard this week. It would add new features that aren't available in the current database like spending details for the university and state corporations. It has bi-partisan support, including an enthusiastic Senator Reinbold, a renowned budget cutter.

Keep an eye on [SB14](#) by Senator Shower, relating to the retention of judicial officers for the court of appeals, district court and magistrates. It proposes significant changes including a transfer of key duties from the Judicial Council to the Commission on Judicial Conduct and legislative approval of some nominees. See a more detailed discussion of the bill below.

The Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority published their 2020 Annual Report. Take the opportunity to learn more about the Trust's ongoing work to support partners, initiatives, and projects that improve the lives and circumstances of Trust Beneficiaries.

Beneficiaries of the Trust include Alaskans who experience mental illness, substance use disorders, developmental and/or intellectual disabilities, Alzheimer's disease or related dementia, and traumatic brain injuries. Click here to view: [Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority 2020 Annual Report](#)

BUDGET ISSUES

The Governor introduced [SB 74](#), the first statewide bond proposal in about 10 years. If passed by the legislature, the \$356 million infrastructure proposal will go to a vote of the people. The proposal totals \$356,405,952 and leverages a federal match of \$1,003,471,000.

Projects of interest included in the general obligation bond include:

- \$25M to School Major Maintenance Grant Fund
- \$18.9M to Fairbanks Youth Facility
- \$2.4M to Fairbanks Pioneer Home
- \$19.5M to Alaska Vocational Technical Center upgrades
- \$12M to Alaska Public Safety Communication Services System upgrades
- \$29.6M to University of Alaska infrastructure projects

Senate Finance Subcommittees start their work this week. Some legislators already have concerns about the lack of projects in Southeast, the overall purpose of the package and the final cost.

Budget Hearings for the week of February 8th

Mon, Feb 8th, 9am, SFIN [SB68](#), the Governor's supplemental/re-appropriations bill receives it's first hearing

Tues, Feb 9th, 7:30am Senate Labor and Workforce Development Finance Subcommittee

Tues, Feb 9th, 9am, SFIN [SB49](#) , the operating budget, [SB51](#), the mental health budget, and a CARES Act funding update are on the schedule

Tues, Feb 9th, 3:30pm, SSTA [SB53](#) Permanent Fund; Advisory Vote
[SJR6](#) Constitutional Amendment: Permanent Funds and PFD
[SJR 1](#) Constitutional Amendment: Guarantee Permanent Fund
Dividend, sponsored by Senator Wielechowski receives its first hearing

Wed, Feb 10th, 7:45am Senate Health and Social Services Finance Subcommittee

Wed, Feb 10th, 9am, SFIN CARES Act funding update continued

Thurs, Feb 11th, 7:30am Senate Natural Resources Finance Subcommittee

Thurs, Feb 11th, 9am, SFIN K-12 FY22 Operating & Formula Walk Through
University FY22 Operating-Subcommittee of the Whole

Thurs, Feb 11th, 3:30pm, SSTA

[SB25](#) State Government Finances; Website

[SJR5](#) Constitutional Amendment: Appropriation Limit; Budget Reserve

[SJR6](#) Constitutional Amendment: Permanent Funds and PFD

[SJR 7](#) Constitutional Amendment: State Tax; Voter Approval

[SB53](#) Permanent Fund; Advisory Vote

[SJR 1](#) Constitutional Amendment: Guarantee Permanent Fund

Dividend

Thurs, Feb 11th, 5:30pm Department of Revenue Finance Subcommittee

BILLS

[SB 14](#), Selection and Review of Judges, sponsored by Senator Shower will be heard in **SJUD on Wednesday and Friday at 1:30pm. *Public testimony on SB14 will be taken on Wednesday.***

The bill makes magistrates subject to retention election. Current law requires only justices or judges to stand for retention. It switches the responsibility of evaluating and providing information and recommendations regarding judges subject to retention from the Judicial Council to the Commission of Judicial Conduct.

Significant changes to the judicial appointment process appear in sections 12 and 14 of the bill, limiting the Judicial Council's ability to recommend people for appointment to only those the council determines is committed to a strict constitutional interpretation of statutes and regulations and is committed to adhering to legislative intent.

SB 14 allows the Governor to appoint a person to the court of appeals, a district court, or a magistrate vacancy who is not nominated by the judicial council, requiring confirmation by a majority of the members of the legislature meeting in joint session. It further adds magistrates to the judiciary monitored by the Commission on Judicial Conduct and provides mechanisms for their censure or removal.

[SB 9](#), Alcohol Beverage Control; Alcohol Reg, sponsored by Senator Micciche **will be heard in SL&C on Friday at 1:30pm**. This 125-page bill is a rewrite of the Alaska Statute Article 4. Alcohol laws. Senator Micciche has introduced a similar version of this bill in previous legislative sessions.

[SB 65](#), Liability Consulting Health Care Provider, sponsored by Senator Kiehl was introduced on the 3rd and referred to HSS, JUD. The bill provides for immunity to a health care provider from civil liability for claims arising from professional consulting services provided to a patient in certain circumstances. In this bill, a healthcare provider includes a physician, podiatrist, osteopath, advanced practice registered nurse, a physician assistant, a dentist, an optometrist, or a pharmacist.

GOVERNOR'S CORNER

First Lady Rose Dunleavy opened the nomination period for the 2021 First Lady's Volunteer Awards - February 1 to April 30th. Nominations can be submitted online-- [First Lady Awards Online Form](#) or download a fillable PDF-- [Fillable PDF download to mail](#) or by hard copy available for pick up at the Governor's offices in Anchorage, Juneau, Fairbanks, and Palmer. The Award Ceremony will be announced at a later date after they get advice from public health officials.

ITEMS OF INTEREST

SEDC will hold hearings on Educating during the Pandemic. The meetings will be held on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at **9am each day**.

Monday, Education Commissioner Johnson will talk about student enrollment counts and Covid-19 federal funding relief.

Wednesday, the committee will hear from Superintendents in Anchorage, Yukon-Koyukuk, Bering Strait, Dillingham, and the Kenai Peninsula Borough School Districts.

Friday, Fairbanks, Lower Kuskokwim, Chugach and Aleutian Region, Kodiak, and Juneau Superintendents round out the discussion.

SJUD will discuss Covid-19 Disaster Declaration, Extensions and Vaccine Liability on **Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 1:30pm**.

Cynthia Toohey, a former legislator with a powerful personality, has died. I served with Cynthia in the 90's and sat right behind her on the House floor. I was lucky to serve on the HHSS Committee in which she chaired.

Cynthia was a good woman. She was a nurse, mother, grandmother and even owned Crow Creek Mine in Girdwood. She was a strong believer in Human Rights for all. Rest In Peace Cynthia.

WAYS TO FOLLOW HEARINGS

Check Calendar Daily – Bills Can Be Rescheduled at Sponsor's/Chair Request

Website: Daily Committee Hearings for February 8-12, 2021 [Weekly Schedule](#)

Gavel to Gavel: Most committee hearings can be seen and heard on Gavel Alaska. It is broadcast on both local access TV and on the internet at [Gavel Alaska Schedule - KTOO](#)

Streaming Video [alaskalegislatretv](#)

Contacting your Legislator/Testifying

The Capitol building is closed to the public during the pandemic. There are no plans for in-person visits or testimony.

Contact your local Legislative Information Office (LIO) to learn how to participate in legislative hearings: [LIO Offices](#)

You also can call using the following numbers.

Tell operator which hearing and bill number you are calling to testify on.

Here's the LIO call-in information for testimony:

If calling from a Juneau phone number: 586-9085

If calling from an Anchorage phone number: 563-9085

If calling from any other number: 844-586-9085

Click here for legislators' email addresses: [Legislator Email Address List](#) *(xls)*

~ End of Report ~

Contact: Caren Robinson (carenr@gci.net)