

A question for Cowper

We'd like to raise a question concerning a letter Gov. Steve Cowper's chief of staff, Pete Jeans, wrote to Sen. John Binkley recently concerning his bill to reduce state salary costs.

The administration questioned the Bethel senator's intent in introducing the bill, stating it could harm the collective bargaining process.

Our question is: If it isn't up to the Legislature to set the guidelines for collective bargaining, whose is it? Setting these guidelines is not only the privilege of legislators, it is their responsibility as elected officials.

Binkley told the *Tundra Times* he is disappointed that the governor has taken this stand. So are we.

Fortunately, Binkley said he although he is disappointed about this turn of events, he is not discouraged. He plans to continue fighting for the bill, co-sponsored by Sens. Willie Hensley of Kotzebue, Jan Faiks of Anchorage and Paul Fischer of Soldotna. They can rest assured they will have the support of this newspaper.

Binkley calls the bill "the right thing to do" and "good policy." We agree.

The bill would save the State of Alaska more than \$27 million, which does not count the savings that would be realized from the University of Alaska. Those figures are not yet available.

The advantage of this bill — which would increase the basic work week from 37 and a half hours to 40 hours, require contracting for services within the private sector if contracting would be cost effective, offer merit raises only in the case of outstanding performance and pay a lump sum for geographic differentials rather than basing them on a percentage of the employee's salary — is that the number of state employees would not be reduced and services to the state would not be cut.

The bill is currently in the Senate Finance Committee, having been passed out of Senate Labor and Commerce Committee. It got only a weak recommendation from the labor and commerce panel.

Binkley said he feels confident the bill will get a better reception once hearings on it begin and people begin testifying in favor of it.

We would hope that anyone who has strong feelings about this legislation — for or against it — would contact their legislators and let them know of their concerns.

We must remember that many people in the private sector are currently feeling the effects of Alaska's budget crisis. Some unions in the state already have negotiated big reductions in wages and/or benefits, such as the Teamsters, the Alaska Railroad Workers and mill workers in Southeast Alaska.

Is it too much to ask that state workers also take their share of cuts?