

Adams explains opposition to proposed state budget

by Sen. Al Adams
for the Tundra Times

On April 29 I faced a difficult decision here in Juneau. A version of the state budget was scheduled to be heard on the Senate floor. A week before, the Senate Majority had been instructed during caucus that if any member attempted to amend the budget on the floor, that act would mean removal from the Majority Caucus.

OPINION

Inupiat Paitot People's Heritage

Although I did not amend the budget, I did deliver the accompanying speech and voted against the budget. Following floor session, the Committee on Committees met, and I was removed as chair of the Community and Regional Affairs Committee.

I firmly believe the consequences of my action were worth not violating personal, professional or legislative integrity. Nothing is ever worth that.

Many problems accompany this budget that adversely affect my area, as well as the state at large. It would have been hypocritical of me to sign off on a budget that contradicts much of what we have heard from the public and what we have been saying as legislators as to what needs to be done to make Alaska economically viable.

Mr. President:

I rise in opposition to the budget before us today. As a former Finance Committee chairman, I am reluctant to take this step because I know that support for the budget is often the glue that holds an organization together. At the same time, my experience also tells me that I cannot in good conscience support this bill.

I will not take the time of this body to propose amendments. I know this would be a futile exercise. I will, however, take a few minutes to explain my opposition.

In my view the budget you have before you is fatally flawed. If it were to be enacted into law without major changes in conference, it would cause terrible harm to the people of this state.

The budget you have before you does many things.

It would reduce the Department of Law's ability to prosecute criminals — while at the same time we here on the Senate floor pass new laws — like recriminalization of marijuana —

which can only add to the workload of the department.

It would reduce the audit functions in the Department of Revenue — while we all stand up on the Senate floor and ask why the state cannot settle its many outstanding tax issues with the major oil companies.

It would jeopardize federal funds for our mental health facilities like the Alaska Psychiatric Institute — while we pretend to add funds for mental health programs.

It would likely force closure of one or more of our correctional facilities — while we all say we champion law and order.

It cuts funding for our local governments and school districts, and at the same time it appears to add hundreds of new positions to state government, positions which may never be filled because of unspecified "general reductions."

The list goes on and on; but I have made my point.

Now I have read in the press that members of this Senate acknowledge that there may be problems in the budget, but that they can be fixed in the Conference Committee.

Now what does that mean, Mr. President?

Well, I'll tell you. It means that in the Conference Committee the House and Senate members will be forced to add back funds to the budget, lots of funds, Mr. President.

In fact, given the way the House and Senate have structured their cuts, I believe it is very possible that the next time you have this budget before you as a Conference Committee report, it may well be higher than what was originally requested by the governor. It certainly won't be lower than what you see today.

As you know, Gov. Cowper has stated he will veto any budget that does not restore funds in a number of vital areas, some of which I have already mentioned.

And therein lies my real objection, Mr. President. Today, I am asked to vote on a bill that makes reductions no one believes are realistic.

I may be asked to vote on a budget that makes little or no cuts at all.

What I will *not* be asked to vote on is a bill that makes the *real* budget reductions that you, the rest of the members of this body and the people of Alaska have said are needed.

We should have done better, Mr. President. I am very disappointed.

Thank you.