

•Editorial

Our (initial) comments on Colletta liquor bills

We would like to express our gratitude to Senator Mike Colletta and his Special Committee on Alcohol and Alcohol-Related Problems for offering to the legislature their package of bills to deal with Alaska's worst health problem. Like many others, particularly in rural Alaska, we have been frustrated at the delays encountered in getting the bills drafted and into the hopper. It seemed for a while that the commitment Mr. Colletta made last summer to draft legislation based on extensive public testimony had faltered.

We do not hesitate to say here that the outpouring of constructive sentiment by Alaskans last summer should be sufficient impetus to see most of these bills through to passage and implementation. We trust that the problem of alcoholism will not become a political issue subject to the petty whims of legislators running hard to retain their seats this year.

As indicated in a related story in this issue, there is one outstanding conflict between the approach to alcoholism taken by Sen. Colletta and that taken by Gov. Hammond. Hammond feels that there should be no increase in appropriations to state programs without concurrent new revenues being available to make up for the increase. To this end, Hammond has proposed an excise tax on liquor to pay for improved alcoholism programs. Mr. Colletta disagrees.

It is our feeling that Gov. Hammond's approach is not only fiscally responsible, but that it conforms to a principle used in other instances: that an industry which has a negative impact on the lives of people should be held liable to some degree for that impact. Let us elaborate:

FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY: There is a lot to be said for spending money when you have it and restraining yourself when you do not. We feel that until the mechanics of the Permanent Fund are firmed up and the cost of the capital move eliminated or made to conform to reality and the oil pipeline is pumping crude at full capacity, that fiscal caution is called for. In addition, we feel it is unreasonable for the state's citizens and lawmakers to continue projecting prosperity on the basis of oil wealth. We will not comment at this point on the merits of increasing present oil and gas taxes, but we do think it's unfair to expect that one industry to pay an unfair portion of our ticket into the future.

INDUSTRY IMPACT: Since the advent of a certain amount of environmental responsibility in our country during the last decade, it has been customary to expect industries to pay, directly or indirectly, for the negative impact they have on the health and social well-being of citizens. Auto manufacturers must pay the cost of improved emission controls to preserve the integrity of our air; we are beginning to realize that air quality ranks with ease and speed of travel on our list of lifestyle priorities. We recognize that the manufacturers will pass some of their cost burden on to us in the form of higher prices. In the same way, oil companies are expected to be liable for the on-shore impact of offshore oil exploration and development, at least to some degree.

This principle should apply no less to the problem of alcoholism impact. The industry that manufactures liquor has a negative impact on society, that much is apparent without contriving a measure of how great the impact is. We have no qualms about urging the implementation of a tax on the liquor industry to help offset the negative impact its pursuit of profit through the sale of intoxicating beverages. Certainly, we would expect the consumer in

turn to shoulder part of the financial burden.

It is important to note that we regret Mr. Colletta's position on the excise tax, but it does not blind us to the obvious merits of many of the bills that he did introduce. We hope Mr. Colletta will continue to display a commitment to the battle on alcoholism in the halls of the legislature and on the Senate floor. It is not enough for a legislator to put his constituents' wish list in the hopper. To do so will doom the bills to death from indifference. Bills must be nurtured and managed through committees, around politics, under and over ignorance and misunderstanding. We see no reason why the best of the Hammond and Colletta proposals cannot become law by the time the legislature goes home this year if so managed. We hope Sen. Colletta and his colleagues on the special alcoholism committee agree.

J.R.R.