

# Binkley: Cowper's cuts were poorly thought out

by Sen. John Binkley  
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — When he prepared his list of budget vetoes recently, Gov. Steve Cowper ignored a prime opportunity to cut the size and ongoing cost of state government.

Instead, he chose to wipe out funding for a long list of projects and programs aimed at fulfilling local needs.

Many of Cowper's vetoes, totalling \$325 million, were poorly thought out, if there was any thinking involved at all.

## OPINION

That's why I am going to vote to call the Legislature back into special session if the opportunity arises. And if we do go back to Juneau, I believe there is a very good chance that at least some of the governor's vetoes will be overridden.

This would not be an exercise that I'd enjoy. But I believe the governor has made serious — even tragic — mistakes with some of these vetoes, and now there is no other option. He can't change his mind now that the bill has been signed with the vetoes; our only hope of restoring some of the funding he eliminated is through a veto session.

The governor argues his vetoes were necessary because the price of oil has fallen and we would otherwise face a



huge deficit. True, oil prices did fall toward the end of spring, but that's nothing new.

They've already rebounded quite a bit, and the latest information indicates OPEC has finally gotten control of production levels again. That means prices are likely to stabilize at a higher level in plenty of time to avoid the so-called deficit.

There is another revenue possibility the governor should have considered, and that's money from lawsuit settlements. The state has billions of dollars at stake in a variety of lawsuits — mostly tax cases against oil companies — and there's a strong chance that some substantial settlements will

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come in this year.

But lawsuits and oil price fluctuations aside, if the governor truly believed the budget needed to be adjusted so drastically, he should have so informed the Legislature when we arrived here June 25 for the special session. We were in session until July 8 and easily could have taken up a revised budget bill and passed it to him before we adjourned.

The fact is, we in the Senate were well aware of the oil price gyrations and asked the Governor's Office to give us a revenue picture during the special session. The governor did not respond. If he really believed we were heading for a drastic deficit, I find it appalling that he gave no hint to the people or the Legislature while he had us here in Juneau.

Even if you can overlook the shallowness of his justification for why he did the vetoes, you really begin to get the sensation of walking on eels when you examine *how* he did them.

Again, legislators were not consulted, and that makes no sense. Legislators put money in the budget in the first place because their constituents have convinced them there is a need, and they have the best feel for which projects and grants are critical and which could be put off for another year if something needs to be cut.

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Not seeking the input of legislators seems foolish to me, but even that mistake could have been minimized if the governor had at least talked with the affected communities or with the state agencies involved. He didn't check with anyone, as far as I can tell.

Seeking information beyond the walls of his office might have brought some fairness and balance and just plain good sense to the governor's veto list. As it happened, none of those qualities can be found there now. For example:

- Only \$22.5 million of the \$325 million in vetoes came out of the agencies of state government, and this may be the most ironic part of the governor's actions. If he truly were alarmed about a possible budget deficit, why did he do so little to cut the highest cost of government?

Instead, he left the bureaucracy virtually untouched, but he slashed deeply into capital projects and state support for programs in the local communities, including many that benefit the poor and homeless.

- There was no statewide equity to his vetoes. One election district was cut by only 8 percent; the sharpest cut was more than 93 percent. This doesn't offer very convincing proof that a rational process aimed at reducing statewide spending was involved.

- Among the vetoes in rural Alaska districts were a whole host of important projects, including some safe-water projects, such as those I put in

the budget for Bethel, Tyonek and Tanana. Yet, while those projects were eliminated, the governor didn't touch \$105 million spent from the Railbelt Energy Fund, including \$25 million for the Healy co-generation project, a massive power plant whose need has been questioned. Some say it could cause Railbelt electric rates to increase.

All told, the governor did very little right and very much wrong in the way he went about these vetoes. I only hope we can now round up the votes it takes to get back to Juneau and undo his mistakes.

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