

Education funds help, but are they enough?

We applaud the signing of Senate Bill 60 and Senate Bill 7. These companion measures provide funding and a prioritizing mechanism for long-awaited school construction and maintenance projects throughout the state. Some of these projects will correct serious safety problems, especially in rural schools.

However, we fear that the mechanism for prioritizing school projects obscures some hard political realities and feeds the notion that we can't afford funding for education and other critical needs.

The appropriations bill, SB 60, as signed by Governor Hickel provides \$169,866,000 for K-12 school facilities in urban and rural districts. Most of this will be contracted in the next year or two, providing everything from school replacements and additions to roof repairs and handicap access. A substantial sum was also set aside for the University of Alaska's deferred maintenance program.

Senate Bill 7 requires school districts to provide two percent matching funds for construction and annually submit six-year capitol improvement plans for state review and approval. Projects included in the plans must meet certain common-sense criteria to safeguard against pork barreling and ensure fairness in fiscal allocations among competing districts.

We feel the hard-nosed pragmatism of the prioritizing mechanism pay us substantial benefits regardless of financial scarcity or plenty. This is simply good stewardship. Yet these measures are borne substantially of the perception that the state is fiscally strapped, that we don't have enough money to pay for everything we used to think we needed.

There is no question that as oil revenues decline, pressure on the state's budget will grow. Luckily, we have substantial reserves and several simple revenue enhancement options to deal with the rainy day we can all see on the horizon. We are told, however, that we have to prioritize school projects because funds available for education are diminishing *right now*.

Yet *right now*, the state has money to illegally bulldoze a road to Cordova. There seems to be millions of dollars available to plan and design new roads to "open up the country" all the way to the Bering Sea. Millions more are being spent to sue the federal government on a variety of issues on which the state has little hope of prevailing.

Are these needs, or political luxuries? Do these projects really make sense, or do they stand faltering on the soft foundation of speculative, boondoggle economics? How can we say we can't afford education when we're spending so much for so little benefit in other areas?

It is time we applied the same consultative, cost-benefit concept to all state spending that we are now imposing on school projects. It is time to establish sound criteria to prioritize all state spending, including the governor's pet projects.

If we can't afford education, or adequate sanitation in rural areas, or timely issuance of environmental permits for existing industries, how can we afford a road to Nome?