

'Appearances' are important

A month ago, our new governor Bill Sheffield took a trip to negotiate with U.S. Interior Secretary James Watt on issuing oil leases in the environmentally sensitive and culturally crucial Norton Sound.

On his way back to Alaska, Sheffield, his attorney general and his commissioner of natural resources stopped in Texas oil country to appear at oil industry fund raisers for Sheffield.

The trips to Washington D.C. and to Texas were well reported and, Sheffield maintains, done entirely on the up and up. No state money went into the trips, he said and maintained there was nothing wrong with him collecting a money from the oil industry right after settling a deal with Watt which would greatly benefit that industry.

The governor was criticized at the time for his decision and apparent lack of resolve in dealing with Watt. Sheffield said he got the best deal possible. Critics said he didn't but at the time didn't criticize him for his oil solicitation.

Last week, Sen. Frank Ferguson of Kotzebue did criticize Sheffield and called for an investigation into the fund-raising trip.

Sheffield responded that Ferguson was only playing politics and was, in fact, upset because Sheffield didn't play his way in a state budgeting process.

We are well aware of the political prowess which Sen. Ferguson possesses and we are aware that he rarely does something without a reason. It may or may not be true that he withheld comment on the Sheffield oil fundraiser until he had a good time.

But that doesn't in any way change the fact that something smells pretty bad about that entire trip.

Gov. Sheffield is a man who has, for many years, run his own show in the way businessmen run businesses. He has doubtless wine and dined numerous folks whose opinion he hoped to sway.

And it is entirely possible that he sees nothing wrong with this fund-raiser in Texas.

But he should think again. He has seriously damaged his credibility in the eyes of many people who had a great deal of faith in him.

Those people believed Sheffield when he made what promises he made. And now he has committed a very basic blunder.

Less than three months into his term as governor the man has given to many the impression that he can be bought.

That is the only impression that one can gain from the simple action of flying from negotiations with the chief oil developer in the country into the buffet-fed, wining and dining arms of the oil industry.

What surprises us is that Mr. Sheffield failed to realize the consequences of his actions and that he is now surprised when people don't accept his "I am innocent" responses.

The appearance of impropriety is almost as important as actual wrongdoing itself.

Mr. Sheffield should have known that.