

# Lawmakers set for rough session

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by Tundra**TIMES** staff

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Like the tense pre-snap rippling along a football scrimmage line, there were some last minute movements before the Alaska Legislature opened this week.

Democratic Sen. Dave Donley filled out a new voter registration card and became a Republican. Rep. Carl Moses of Unalaska remained a Republican, but declined to rejoin the conservative coalition of House Speaker Gail Phillips.

Just looking at the way the numbers stack up after last fall's elections, it seems unlikely that these adjustments will affect the outcome of play during this year's session. But, like any match-up between long-time rivals, the very intensity and rigor of the game can sometimes produce new openings and turn-

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# • Rough legislative session ahead

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overs, and the stakes in this year's contest are very high. As Associated Press Writer David Germain put it recently:

"The Alaska Legislature returns to work with a fortified Republican leadership intent on two main things: Shrinking state government and putting a crimp in the governor's re-election prospects."

The 1998 governor's race will determine who writes the next reapportionment plan in the year 2,000, a critical issue for rural voters.

In the House, Republicans control 28

of 40 seats, including three held by Democrats. On the Senate side, the Republican majority has 15 of 20 members, including one seat held by a Democrat. Overall, Republicans control 43 seats; only 40 votes are needed to override any veto by Gov. Tony Knowles of their legislative proposals.

The Democratic lawmakers who opted to join the majority are Sen. Jerry Mackie, Craig; Rep. Richard Foster, Nome; Rep. Ivan Ivan, Akiak; and Rep. Bill Williams, Saxman. It remains to be seen exactly what perks the Democrats will receive for joining the conservative legion.

Although a rise in oil prices has made it unnecessary to tap reserves to balance the current fiscal 1997 budget, the majority is pursuing its goal of cutting another \$60 million in state spending for fiscal year 1998. Current projections indicate a state budget shortfall in 1998 of about \$400 million. The diminished number of Democrats will join the governor in trying to slow the pace and reduce the harmful social and economic impacts of new cuts.

Late last year, Knowles outlined a proposed budget of \$2.4 billion as part of a long-term strategy to bring state expenditures in line with revenues.

"Alaska's budget is more than just a column of numbers," Knowles said. "It fosters economic development and permits us to manage our resources wisely. It gives us the tools to provide our children a healthy start and a solid education and a solid education. It determines whether our communities are safe and healthy. Those are my priorities and that's what my budget plan for the coming year offers."

The governor said his 1998 budget achieves about 90 percent of the \$100 million, three-year budget cut he outlined last spring. It is about \$2.5 million less than this year's budget, plus it absorbs \$39 million in increases to formula programs, such as increased student enrollment, aid

to the poorest Alaskans and increased personnel costs.

"We're sticking with our plan to reduce the budget \$100 million over three years," Knowles said. "Contrary to popular mythology, Alaska's state budget has been going down. Between the Fiscal 1995 budget I inherited and the Fiscal 1998 budget (proposal), we have cut state spending nearly \$140 million. When adjusted for inflation, the state operating budget has been cut 20 percent since 1991. Even including Permanent Fund dividends, we're spending \$340 less per person than we were 18 years ago"

Besides the budget, Knowles and his legislative counterparts will try to reach agreement on a tort reform bill to cap the amount of damages that can be awarded by the courts in civil lawsuits, and a revised formula for education spending. Republicans are also expected, through legislative proposals and budget cuts, to roll back environmental regulation.

Although it's on the back of everyone's mind, there's no clear indication of how Knowles and the Legislature are likely to deal with subsistence. For several years now, the conservative majority has blocked efforts to put the question of a rural subsistence hunting and fishing priority before voters.