

## Bush Caucus well represented

# Rural areas could retain clout

by **Patty Ginsburg**

for the Tundra Times

Despite the departure of several veteran legislators, rural areas of the state could retain a fair amount of clout under the leadership organizations set up in the State House and Senate for the 1987-88 Legislature.

Under the organizations expected to hold up when the session begins next month, rural lawmakers hold key positions in both the House and Senate.

Rep. Al Adams, D-Kotzebue, is optimistic that the Bush will be able to hold its own in the 15th Legislature.

"The organizations are excellent for rural Alaska. All the rural legislators are in the majority in both houses, and they all have specific roles," Adams said.

With budget cuts expected to be the overwhelming issue in the next two years, the makeup of the finance committees in each house is critical to ensure that those cuts are fair and equitable, Adams said.

The Bush Caucus is well represented on both, with Adams again at the helm of the House Finance Committee, and Sen. John Binkley, R-Bethel, co-chairing the Senate Finance Committee.

With Binkley on Senate Finance are three other members of the Bush Caucus — Democrats Jim Duncan of Juneau and Fred Zharoff of Kodiak, as well as the replacement for Frank Ferguson, D-Kotzebue, giving them a majority on the seven-member panel.

Other major positions held by rural legislators include House Speaker Ben Grussendorf, D-Sitka, and Senate Rules Committee Chairman Dick Eliason, R-Sitka. House Rules Committee Chairman Mike Navarre, D-Kenai, while not an official member of the Bush Caucus, has been friendly to rural interests, Adams said.

The Rules Committee is important because the chairman controls the calendar for each house. Before any piece of legislation comes up for a vote on the floor, it must pass through the

Rules Committee.

Rep. Adelheid Herrmann, D-Naknek, shares Adams' satisfaction with the legislative line-up.

"We're in pretty good positions in the House. The thing that keeps us strong is that we stick together. That's where the power comes from," she said.

The most significant change in the House is that for the first time since 1981, the leadership organization is composed entirely of Democrats. That, Adams said, will make the work go more smoothly since there will be fewer political differences that have to be bridged.

The picture is different in the Senate, however. Although Republicans hold an outright majority there, the leadership is a coalition of Republicans and Democrats, urban and rural. With veterans Frank Ferguson and John Sackett retiring, their replacements and colleagues have

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# Adams: We work together

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a formidable challenge ahead.

Adams said they are not the only departing senators who will be missed.

"Bill Ray (D-Juneau) and Bob Ziegler (D-Ketchikan) weren't members of the caucus, but we'll feel their loss of experience," he said.

"They understood Bush issues. Now it'll be up to Zharoff, Binkley and Ferguson's replacement to keep the Bush influence going," he said.

That task would be difficult enough in a good year, but with serious budget decisions awaiting lawmakers, the challenge will be much greater. Both Adams and Herrmann anticipate battles over continuation of the Power Cost Equalization Fund and the Longevity Bonus Program, in addition to other program cuts and debate about a capital budget.

And then there's the education process.

"With a new governor, it's just like starting over," Herrmann said. "We

have to educate people about our concerns. And there will always be that rural/urban fight."

No area of the state will escape the budget crunch, Adams said. But the primary challenge for rural lawmakers will be to work for cuts that are uniform, fair and equitable.

The way to accomplish that, Adams said, is with the tool that has become the hallmark of the Bush Caucus: "We work together, with very little infighting."