

State to withdraw from open meetings lawsuit

Gov. Steve Cowper ordered the Alaska Department of Law to withdraw the state's participation in an open meetings lawsuit against the Legislature filed by two Alaska newspapers and the League of Women Voters.

Cowper ordered the action because he said, "the state has no business in court fighting to keep the public out of meetings it should be permitted to attend."

"Government in this state must be an open process to work right, and under my administration it will be open," Cowper said. "The first step is to withdraw from this suit."

At issue is a lawsuit filed last April by the Anchorage Daily News, the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner and the League of Women Voters against the Legislature, asking the courts to stop what they said were illegal closed-door meetings on the state budget.

The state, under the previous administration, joined the suit following an initial Superior Court judgement in May which found largely in favor of the newspapers and league.

The state's involvement was prompted by several concerns, but most notable was a potential risk to all legislative actions taken that session in the closed meetings including the state budget.

The Superior Court ruling was later

overturned, and the case is currently pending before the Alaska Supreme Court. The state's brief in that proceeding was due earlier this month.

The Department of Law advised the Governor recently that several of its original concerns have diminished since the state joined the suit. Most notably, the newspapers and league agreed to waive any claim to invalidate the budget bills already passed by the Legislature.