

MacLean summarizes first session

by Rep. Eileen P. MacLean
for the Tundra Times

The last day of the first session of the 16th Alaska Legislature was May 9. Budget work continued until the last hour before adjournment. Many important bills were passed this year and others were left for additional work next year.

OPINION

Inupiat Paitot
People's Heritage

The final budget agreed upon by the Conference Committee was \$3.3 billion, about \$50 million less than Gov. Steve Cowper's proposed budget and about \$40 million more than what was budgeted for this year.

We were able to save many important programs for District 22. All in all, I am pleased with our record of accomplishments this year.

The Conference Committee agreed on fully funding the Longevity Bonus at \$250 per month for only 11 months with the intent of adding a supplemental appropriation to cover the additional month if a new agreement could not be reached next session on how to reduce costs of the program.

The Conference Committee agreed on the 6 percent cut to the Power Cost Equalization program. However, additional carry over funds were approved which will enable the PCE program to continue at its current level with few changes.

Municipal Assistance and Revenue Sharing were both cut 6 percent by the Conference Committee. Many of our smallest communities depend heavily on these funding sources and I was pleased that we did not take larger cuts recommended by the House.

The Head Start program was increased by \$665,000 and Day Care Assistance Grants were increased \$190,000 from the current level.

The Housing Assistance Program, Rural Development Grants and Statewide Assistance programs will also receive slightly more than they did last year. These programs have been important to rural Alaska in the past.



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Most reductions in the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities budget were in engineering and administration. Continuation of Maintenance and operation and the rural airport program were given high priority. In addition, intent language was added to require the department to attain legislative approval before implementing any lease rate or landing fee increases at rural airports.

Both the House and Senate had recommended changing the Dalton Highway to a toll road. The Conference Committee, however, recommended that if the department could not negotiate a cost recovery agreement with the North Slope oil producers for the maintenance of the Dalton Highway by Oct. 1, then a toll would be initiated for users of the highway. **This does not include opening the highway for public use.**

A domestic violence rural outreach component was funded for \$75,000. This will enable more resources to go to rural Alaska. Levels of Alaska State Trooper and Village Public Safety Officer funding will be maintained.

One of the priorities of the education sub-committee, of which I was a member, was to fully fund the foundation program. By reducing other areas in the budget, in addition to \$3.5 million in the reappropriation bill, the foundation account will be fully

funded. This was also one of my personal priorities.

The final amount agreed upon for debt retirement was \$107.8 million. This represents 93 percent of full entitlement. Debt retirement is the amount the state pays to cities and municipalities to pay back part of the cost of school construction.

The House originally eliminated funding for community schools, however strong support was expressed to continue the program. And \$400,000 was restored to the House version of the budget. The Senate recommended \$600,000 and the Conference Committee agreed on \$600,000.

The House and Senate were in agreement on Adult Basic Education. Both supported full funding at the governor's requested level of \$2,174,600.

The House and Senate were also both in agreement and supported continued funding for the Rural School Vocational Program at the governor's proposed level of \$200,000.

House Bill 303, relating to Teacher Certification passed the House and was left in the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Committee. This bill would enable the Department of Education to issue special teaching certificates for Native Language Instructors, ROTC and other specialized

fields.

House Concurrent Resolution 18, establishing a Joint House and Senate Committee on School Performance was passed into law. This committee will continue to explore steps that could be taken to bring about higher levels of student achievement in basic skills and other areas. The committee would also help to encourage broad public participation in strengthening academic education within our educational system.

House Bill 331, relating to School Performance Recommendations was left in the House Rules Committee. This bill would establish a state education policy, add education planning and planning grants to school districts and would require the establishment of regional school boards to consult with advisory boards.

House Concurrent Resolution 47, establishing a Joint Commission on the Status of Alaska Natives by Congress was left in the House Rules Committee. The purpose of the commission will be to conduct a comprehensive review of state and federal policies affecting Alaska Natives, the implementation of the policies and the current health, social and economic status of Alaska Natives. HCR 47 was left in the House Rules Committee.

House Bill 159, relating to taxation of in place resources was left in the Senate Resources Committee. This bill would exempt from municipal taxation undeveloped "in-place" natural resources from assessments in local tax roles. This means that the state assessor could not add the value of natural resources before they are developed to a borough's taxable property.

Senate Bill 175, relating to Alcohol Warning Signs was passed into law. This bill will require that signs be posted in bars, liquor stores and restaurants warning that drinking alcoholic beverages during pregnancy can cause birth defects.

In a previous news article on Bootlegging, Nuiqsut was reported as a community which allowed importation of alcoholic beverages. Nuiqsut does not allow the sale or importation of alcoholic beverages. We apologize for this incorrect information.