

# Legislature turns deaf ear to rural needs

by Jeff Richardson  
*Tundra Times staff*

---

The heavy battering of rural funding priorities by conservative legislators is likely to continue as the state operating budget heads for a conference committee. The committee consists of three House and three Senate representatives, including one minority member from each chamber.

To the minority members falls the daunting task of trying to prevent the gutting of state government operations by zealous conservative majorities. Although at press time the Senate leadership had not yet named its conference committee members, analysts were increasingly doubtful that minority conference committee members would have sufficient commitment or clout to defend rural priorities.

## House deals heavy blows to Bush

Although House and Senate budget figures are different, both spending plans contain plenty of bad news for rural residents and Alaska Natives. On the House side, lawmakers propose cuts over last year's spending or reductions in the Governor's proposed budget, including:

- no funding for five new Vil-

*Page 5, please*

# Legislature turns deaf ear to rural needs . . .

*Continued from Page 1*

lage Public Safety Officers requested by the governor;

- cutting funding for regional economic development organizations by \$12,000 each;

- reduced funding for two rural development programs totaling \$545,000;

- cutting revenue sharing and municipal assistance programs by 8.8 percent each for a total of \$5,461,000;

- elimination of funding for the ANCSA 14(c)(3) technical assistance program operated by the Alaska Native Foundation;

- cutting \$160,000 from Alaska Legal Services;

- a devastating reduction in funds for the Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game totaling \$806,000, with far-reaching implications for rural Alaska;

- cutting public radio funding by 25 percent and eliminating public television; and

- reduced funding for the Rural Alaska Television Network (RATNET) by \$309,000.

- AFDC.....

## **Senate cuts even deeper**

On the Senate side, cuts were generally even deeper than in the House. They included:

- \$3.1 million from the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program;

- \$3.3 million from the Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game, mostly in the Subsistence and Habitat Divisions;

- \$1.5 million from the Dept. of Environmental Conservation; and

- elimination of RATNET.

Minority playing chicken with Legislative leadership

The one hope that rural and other minority legislators have of staunching the flow of budget blood is threatening to withhold their support of using reserve funds to balance the budget. It is projected that even with spending reductions, the state faces a revenue shortfall of more than \$500 million for fiscal year 1996. Under state law, recently upheld by the court, three-quarters of Senators and Representatives must support using the Constitutional Budget Reserve to balance the budget.

## **Where is the governor?**

While legislators position themselves for the conference committee, and the work on education and capital spending which will follow, some people are angry and others dejected that the governor and his legislative emissaries have not been playing a much higher profile game of hardball. Knowles spokesman Bob King said recently that while the Senate budget falls short of providing needed funding, the administration will continue to negotiate until a final agreement is reached. However, evidence that the governor's policy, widely viewed as one of compromise and accommodation, is hard to come by.

With playing time running short for this session, some rural legislators and their staff members

are seething over what they perceive as the governor's failure to fight for his priorities, many of which they share. Others, still reeling in the backwash of budget steamrollers driven at break-neck speed by conservatives, are openly depressed about the damage to rural areas.

## **No rationale for cuts**

"We've sure been struggling with what to tell our constituents," said one aide who asked not to be identified. "It seems like all the rallied efforts fall on deaf ears. There doesn't seem to be any rationale for setting priorities. I don't know that there's any power to do anything. I'm real discouraged."

One rural legislative staff member said the conservative leadership in the House is continually finding ways to get around the rules in order to advance its agenda, and even some staff mem-

bers working for majority members are rumored to be upset about the scope and depth of budget cuts.

## **Knowles running out of options**

Another staffer who declined identification suggested the administration should be taking much

more drastic measures in defense of his budget and program priorities. The staff person suggested he should have informed the majority leadership long ago that if they

weren't willing to be more accommodating to his budget plan that he would veto the budget when it came to his desk and force them back into session until adjustments were made. The window of opportunity for using such a threat effectively is nearly, if not already, past. If he should decide to veto the budget without first having signaled the intention, he could be accused of bad faith and criticized for wasting hundreds of thousands of dollars on a special session called without prior warning. The staffer suggested that if the governor wasn't going to get tough, rural and Native people may have to do it themselves.

"Desperate times require desperate measures," said the staffer. "You've got to threaten these people. It's the only thing they understand. It's time to get nasty."

## **Education likely to be short-**

## **changed, too**

This year, legislators decided to tackle education funding separately from the rest of the operating budget. On the House side, the majority wants to cap funding for the next two years at the FY 95 level and pay for it from the Constitutional Budget Reserve. There would be no additional funding for increased enrollment during that time. This would result in a loss of \$13.4 million in education funds for FY 96 and \$29.4 million in FY 97.

The Senate leadership has yet to announce its education funding plans.

## **Then there's the capital budget**

Also awaiting legislative action is the state's capital construction budget. Gov. Knowles has proposed spending \$135 million on roads, sewer and water and other infrastructure projects.



An unidentified protester marches in front of Anchorage's Federal Building to help save RATNET.

*Photo by Anna M. Pickett*