

Sackett controlled pay raise issue

By LAURY ROBERTS

John Sackett didn't want to be in Juneau for the State's fifth special session of the Alaska State legislature. Yet the senator from Galena kept his equally impatient political colleagues waiting in the capital nearly three days until he moved to resolve the state employee raise issue left in limbo three months earlier.

As chairman of the Senate Finance committee, from which the pay bills had to be released, Sackett called the shots last week.

He spent much of the time in secret meetings with other players in the Senate leadership: George Hohman of Bethel, Clem Tillion of Halibut Cove, Bill Sumner and Mike Colleta of Anchorage. More than 50 other legislators - House members and Senate Republicans and Democrats not in Sackett's inner circle - wandered the capitol hallways, held separate meetings or chatted and played cards in the lounge, waiting for the Native senator to
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At issue was about \$30 million in negotiated cost of living increases for 8,000 state employees in several bargaining units, which the Senate leadership had refused to consider before adjourning the regular session in early May. After the Alaska Public Employees Association (APEA), representing 6,000 workers, filed suit against the state and threatened to strike, Gov. Jay Hammond called legislators back to Juneau. The agenda included minor changes in the state's collective bargaining law.

On the first day of the special session the House of Representatives approved a \$21 million pay raise package, which included wage increases for themselves, the governor, judges, commissioners, and for the recently negotiated Inland Boatmen's Union Contract.

Coupled with the nearly \$10 million in raises they had approved last spring, the House had completed its work and was anxious to go home. Altering collective bargaining would have to wait until 1980.

During an informal bipartisan caucus on the second day, the House agreed to give the Senate until 7 o'clock that evening to make up its collective mind.

In the meantime, APEA lobbyists were nervously huddled in the second floor hallway. They were afraid the Senate would adjourn again without considering the pay hikes and wary of AFL-CIO honchos who had opposed the special session and were gearing up to raid APEA membership if the bid for the pay raises failed.

APEA executive director, Pat Murphy, felt especially betrayed by Sackett. Just before the end of the regular session last spring Sackett held a fundraiser, inviting everyone who had a bill pending before his committee.

APEA coughed up \$500 for the affair, according to Murphy, with the tacit hope that Sackett would allow the pay bills, already approved by the House, out of his committee. But the measures languished there

until a compromise was struck with Sackett several months later - on the third day of the special session.

Sackett did not want the Senate to take any action last week, saying special sessions should be called only for emergencies, not when the governor caves in to pressure from narrow interest groups. But the House, as planned, had adjourned the second night and the next move was clearly up to the Senate.

Finally Sackett agreed to fund only those pay raises approved by the House last spring - \$9 million worth - which retroactively covered cost of living hikes through June, 1979. Raises still due for the remainder of this year were not considered, nor were increases for the state's top officials or the IBU.

When the Senate Finance Committee finally met, it okayed without debate four bills passed over from the House months earlier, an action the committee could have taken in May. It ignored legislation approved by the House two days prior, negating any need for representatives to have come to Juneau at all this summer.

The full Senate quickly and unanimously endorsed the Finance chairman and

Sackett promised to consider the remaining pay packages in January.

Murphy was more relieved than elated, saying his membership received about 65 percent of its negotiated raises. He was confident that Sackett would fulfill his promise of deferred consideration of the remaining pay hikes.