

Senator Sackett faults Ombudsman's reductions in rural service

Senator John Sackett, Co-Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, said that while he understands the need for the Ombudsman's Office to make cuts in their operating budget plans for the coming fiscal year, he is unhappy that the office would seek to reduce services to Rural Alaska while maintaining three offices in urban centers.

"Just about every agency in government has been cut back somewhat," said Sackett, "but our instructions were to reduce the number of personnel in the central offices and to leave programs and services affecting the public alone."

Sackett was reacting to recent reports by John Chenoweth, the State's Ombudsman, and chief of the trouble-shooting office, that the budget reductions would force cutbacks in travel to rural communities and result in the Ombudsman's Office refusing to accept collect calls from rural residents.

Sackett said that with offices in Fairbanks, Juneau, and Anchorage, it would appear that cutting visits to rural areas and refusing to accept collect calls from rural residents, would leave only urban residents with access to the office.

"The Ombudsman's Office was designed to assist residents with problems relating to state government. They've done a good job," Sackett said, "but I'm concerned that the announced reductions in service seem to impact rural residents—and very often it's residents in isolated villages that need the services most."

Sackett noted that without rural

visits by the Ombudsman's Office and by refusing to accept collect phone calls, many village residents will be left without a way to seek help in resolving problems they have with state government. He said that urban residents almost always have immediate access to their legislators but that in rural communities the distance from a village to the nearest Ombudsman's Office or their legislators is quite great.

"I would hope that the Ombudsman's Office would give some thought to finding a way to sustain the rural visits and to continuing their policy of accepting collect phone calls," said Sackett, "even if it's necessary to cutback on full-time operations in one of the urban offices."

Sackett noted that in the urban centers there are legislative information offices usually staffed

with legislative employees that can handle some of the complaints and problems that people might have with state agencies. He also said that with the Ombudsman's Offices in Fairbanks, Juneau, and Anchorage, urban Alaskans have a variety of offices to contact to seek assistance with their problems. But, said Sackett, "in most villages there are no state offices designed to help

residents with problems. It requires a letter, a long distance phone call, or even a trip into the city, to resolve a problem."

"It just seems to me," said Sackett, "that an effort could be made to maintain the rural services (visits and accepting collecting collect phone calls) and look for other ways to cutback at the urban offices. I think that's only reasonable and fair."