

Senators grapple with tough decisions

by Sen.
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for the Tundra Times



The end of the legislative session is approaching, and the state's budget for next year is in the last stages of consideration.

The House, as is traditional, has started budget close-out hearings before the Senate and, in several key areas, they have added back funds which the governor had deleted in his revised budget presentation of mid-March.

The House was expected to complete its budget by last week, and the Senate will probably follow within about two weeks.

A Conference Committee will be appointed by both bodies of the Legislature to mediate differences between the House and Senate budget, and then it will go on to the governor for his signature or veto.

Some issues of importance to rural residents already have been decided by the House and, in many instances, represent a different approach from that of the governor. Among them:

•Longevity Bonuses — The governor has proposed reducing bonuses by \$50 a month for each person and mak-

ing the program needs based. The House has rejected this and has added \$13.9 million to the budget to continue the program as it is now.

•Public Broadcasting — The governor proposed to reduce support to public radio and television from \$6,585,700 this year to \$1,347,200 next year. The House has voted to raise this to \$6,871,800, or, nearly \$300,000 more than this year and more than four times as much as the governor proposed. This would mean that no public stations would have to close next year.

•RATNET — The governor had decided that rural television would be eliminated entirely in his budget. The House disagrees and has restored funding to keep the station broadcasting television to rural Alaska.

•Power Cost Equalization — The governor reduced the amount of funding for this program by excluding everyone except individual homeowners from benefitting from this program. The House was divided on this issue and, as it stands now, nothing has been done to restore funds to this program.

•Arts Council — The governor's original budget eliminated all funding from the council, but in his March revision to the budget, he restored \$1,050,000 to the program in order to maintain eligibility for federal funds. The House has added another \$1.5 million to the council to bring total funding to within \$175,000 of the current level.

•Health and Social Services — The House added \$11,636,900 to the governor's proposal in a wide variety of programs ranging from Residential Child Care to Public Health Nursing. The House proposal is about \$2.5 million higher than the current year.

These decisions are by no means

final. We have a lot of work ahead of us still, and many decisions will be debated until the closing days of the session.

The budgets I touched on in this report reflect some of the major areas of concerns we have been hearing about.