

Let's give alcoholism a fair hearing

On Monday, we called the Office of the Governor in Fairbanks to dig up a copy of Hammond's proposals to deal with Alaska's number one health problem: Alcoholism. A member of his staff brought over a bundle of bills an inch thick.

We requested the material because it is high time to give the package a thorough looking over. To the best of our knowledge, it is the most comprehensive attempt to bring the war on alcoholism to a successful conclusion; it deserves the close attention of all Alaskans. We must lay these bills on the table one by one, pick them apart in search of flaws and get the kinks worked out.

Unfortunately, some of the Alaskans elected to study and act upon these issues spent several days recently traveling in rural Alaska to hear testimony on the liquor laws. We say unfortunately because the way the hearings were planned, we question their usefulness.

The elected officials we refer to are members of the Special Committee on Alcoholism and Alcohol-Related Legislation. They are at this moment wrapping up a tour of 17 cities and villages allegedly to hear how people feel about the Governor's bills. Sounds good, but when was the last time you tried to hold hearings in 17 towns in five days?

When we spoke with the committee staff, we were impressed with the number of people contacted by the committee. However, these people were notified over a period of more than two weeks about a hearing schedule that may have been out of date by the time they got it. We recognize the difficulty of scheduling the time of six busy legislators, but we cannot believe this is the most we can expect of such an important committee.

Let us be more specific. The committee hearings in Ruby, Galena, Nulato, Anvik and Holy Cross last Saturday. Assuming the committee put in a fifteen hour day, allowing roughly five hours for traveling and other logistical problems and dividing the remainder by five (villages), we arrive at a grand total of two hours for each community. Even if only eight persons testified for fifteen minutes apiece, we question whether the time allowed was sufficient to explore the legislation and establish communication between the people and the committee. Especially considering the difficulty of making detailed comment on TEN separate pieces of legislation.

Perhaps the mathematics game seems unnecessary or foolish. Yet it seems to us that the committee allowed itself just about enough time for hello and goodbye. We hate to think that taxpayers' time and money have been wasted on legislative grandstanding.

We were advised by the committee staff that further hearings are planned for the latter part of the year. We are hopeful that the committee will indicate a deeper interest in the fight on alcoholism by giving the Governor's package the time and energy it deserves. We have not yet endorsed the package, but we heartily applaud the comprehensive approach that Hammond has taken and feel it should be more thoroughly explored.

We remind our readers that they may write the legislators for information on the package and to express their views. We urge them to do so.

For our part, we will soon publish a review and analysis of the Governor's liquor package which we hope will broaden our readers' understanding of this important issue before the legislature convenes in January.