

Lawmakers pressure Bush

by Tundra Times staff

Republican lawmakers can't decide how to keep their promise to cut another \$70 million from the state budget without hurting urban voters. So, much of the first half of the legislative session has been substantially consumed by proposals that would cut rural Alaska down to economic and political size.

That's the consensus of several veteran capitol watchers in Juneau. The irony, they say, is that while Republican legislators have made headlines with their attacks on Native tribes, several bills moving quietly through committees would also hamstring the small state-chartered municipalities that conservatives insist should be the local government of choice for Native villages.

Although none of the bills are moving quickly at the moment, many may have a good chance of passage. Among them are proposals to: restrict funding for and levy taxes on property in unincorporated areas, eliminate the Coastal Zone Management

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Program, conduct an advisory vote on a plan to restore the death penalty, further reduce the ability of the Dept. of Fish and Game to protect important habitat, strip the Dept. of Environmental Conservation of its ability to protect drinking water standards, change the requirements for membership on the board of game to preclude membership by rural residents.

Falling behind

As the legislative session reaches the half-way point, Democratic minority leaders say the legislature is behind schedule. House Minority Leader Gene Kubina says the Republican-led majority has spent too much time on ethics complaints and other issues that distract from legislation, and that has compromised budget work.

Senate Minority Leader Jim Duncan said the majority is putting off tough legislative decisions and can't seem to reach agreement among its own members on which state programs and services to cut.

Adams unhappy with capital budget

Some rural lawmakers also expressed disappointment over the capital budget put forth by Gov. Tony Knowles. The governor released his capital plan late last month, saying it emphasized jobs and education.

"It's a bare bones budget—about \$100 million—but by smart budgeting and getting the best bang for our buck, produces more than \$600 million worth of benefits for Alaskans," Knowles said. "Priority one in this proposal is jobs, creating them and protecting them. That's my most important job as governor."

Although the budget contains \$800,000 for the Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage, Sen. Al Adams of Kotzebue said the budget falls short of meeting the need for state support for rural sanitation services and education construction. According to a statement from the governor's office said the budget contains \$52 million for urban and rural safe water needs.

Bills would diminish local control

One of the biggest threats to local self-determination in pending legislation is the proposal to eliminate the Coastal Zone Management Program. House Bill 28 would repeal the program which, more than any other, involves local communities in planning development for their regions. It would also result in the elimination of federal funds for coastal planning.

Other serious measures include:

Senate Bill 30 - the Mandatory Borough Bill (identical to last year's SB 280) would levy a six mill tax on property owners even if local residents didn't vote to form a borough.

Senate Bill 28 - Unincorporated Community Matching Grants; changes the

amount a community can now receive under the capital matching grant program from a minimum of \$25,000 to a maximum of \$25,000. It includes language that states tribal entities cannot receive state funds under the program and must incorporate as non-profits.

House Bill 4 - Would strip the Dept. of Fish and Game of its ability to issue permits on salmon streams and compromise its ability to protect habitat.

House Bill 51 - Takes away or severely diminishes DEC's ability to protect drinking water standards.

Senate Bill 22 - Requires that a person must have had a hunting or trapping license for five of the last seven years preceding appointment to the Game Board.