

Zharoff sticks by local hire

Senator Fred F. Zharoff (D-Kodiak), chairman of the Senate Labor and Commerce Committee, said today the Legislature will explore in the next session all the legal options that exist to promote, through statute, the employment of Alaska residents.

Senator Zharoff's comments came in reaction to the Alaska Supreme Court's July 10 ruling that, in effect, ordered the Alaska Department of labor to stop enforcing the state's local hire law, which required 95 percent of all employees on state-funded capital projects to be Alaska residents. The court's order is a strong indication the court, in its formal decision, will declare the state's existing law unconstitutional.

"In the meantime, the Department of Labor will use the personnel previously charged with enforcing local hire to survey construction sites this year and to explain to employers the effort being made to obtain voluntary compliance for Alaska hire," Zharoff said.

"In addition, the department will conduct a study of local hire in the public construction field. While the Legislature and the public have been familiar for years with the problem of nonresidents displacing residents in the job market, we have no official documentation. This study will document the problem, and give us the official justification and foundation we need to back up a new law."

The results of the study will be presented to the Legislature in January.

"One idea for writing an acceptable new law, discussed by the department, is to narrow it to more specific circumstances," Zharoff added. "One area we can look at is a trigger mechanism where if unemployment reaches a certain level, or if certain regions of the state suffer an economic slump, resident hire provisions would take effect."

"In addition, a bill now is pending in the State Senate that would require resident hire for resource development projects on state land," Zharoff said. "I hope we can have that passed next year, though it may need to be rewritten once we have reviewed the court's final decision."

The bill — Senate Bill 271, introduced by Senator Joe

Josephson of Anchorage — passed out of the Senate Labor and Commerce Committee last session, and is now pending before the Senate Resources Committee.

"The courts continually frustrate our efforts to respond to the loud and clear message we have received from our constituents to promote the hire of Alaskan residents," Zharoff said. "We have spent millions of dollars building much needed capital projects throughout the state and the courts continually tell us we cannot guarantee, on our own projects, that Alaskans will be employed."

"Local hire is a major concern for the people of Alaska, and a high priority of the Legislature. We will continue our work on this issue in the hope of achieving a successful outcome, the hiring of Alaskans for Alaskan jobs."