

Budget cutbacks close complaint office

The Fairbanks office of the state ombudsman will close this month due to cutbacks in fundings and staff.

The ombudsman is an independent investigator, funded by the state, who investigates citizen complaints or problems with state agencies. Offices will remain in Juneau and Anchorage.

The resignation of acting ombudsman Rob Walton took effect June 1. Walton cited "personal reasons" for his departure, but struggles with the Legislature over funding certainly contributed to his decision.

His replacement, former deputy ombudsman Bruce Aronson, said one of his first tasks will be to oversee the closure of the Fairbanks office.

Aronson has been with the ombudsman office for more than seven

years, working as an investigator in the Juneau office. He will remain in Juneau in his new position as acting ombudsman. Sandy McGill, a former investigator in the Fairbanks ombudsman office, has been hired as deputy ombudsman and will start work full-time in the Anchorage office Aug. 1.

Walton took over the office last year after the legislature reduced the budget by 55 percent and added intent language to consider eliminating the office entirely in 1987. He said he is pleased the legislation decided this year to continue funding the office, but is disappointed that this session's 25 percent budget reduction, coming on top of last year's 55 percent cut, will mean major changes for the office.

The office's budget for the coming

fiscal year will be \$541,000, roughly one-third of the total from two years ago.

The office staff has been reduced from 24 to nine during the same period.

The Fairbanks office will close officially on June 30, the last day of the current fiscal year.

Cases will be transferred to remaining staff in Anchorage and Juneau. One of the two Fairbanks investigators will be transferred to Juneau and the other staff member will be laid off, Aronson said.

Toll-free phone service will be maintained so that Fairbanks and Interior Alaska residents will be able to call the Anchorage office to file complaints.