

Budget crunch dominates 1989 session

Bush legislators outline concerns

by Steve Pilkington

Tundra Times reporter

Although several difficult issues affecting rural Alaska will confront the 16th Alaska State Legislature, which convened today, the heavyweight is the state's budget, according to Alaska legislators.

In addition to the budget, two legislators say they will look into a social issue affecting rural Alaska — the problems state post-motem regulations are creating for grieving rural families.

But the largest task, according to lawmakers, is a concern over finding a way to balance state spending and revenues.

"The overall issue is going to be the financial situation of the state," said Sen. Fred Zharoff, D-Kodiak.

"If there is a shortfall in dollars, it may change funding for education. We have to look at the effect that may have on rural areas," Zharoff said.

Rep. Lyman Hoffman, D-Bethel, said other issues, such as the Power Cost Equalization Program, are important for the Bush during this budget crunch.

"With the budget cuts, the power equalization program is a priority," Hoffman said.

The program is a direct subsidy from the state to electric utilities which covers part of the cost rural families must pay for electricity. The program directed some \$19 million last year to help pay for expensive rural electrical costs, Hoffman said.

Senate President-elect Tim Kelly, R-

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Anchorage, said that the Legislature was not going to single out any rural program for cutbacks if there is a budget shortfall.

"We're facing an \$800 million deficit. If there are budget cutbacks it will affect everything across the board," he said.

But state spending is not the only part of the budget concerning the Legislature. A method for increasing state revenues, possibly through taxation, is also at issue.

"I don't think the chances for income taxes are very good for the next few years," Kelly said. But that doesn't rule out a state sales tax, he added.

Rep. Sam Cotten, D-Eagle River,

speaker of the House-elect, said a move to impose state taxes or use the Permanent Fund earnings is going to come up during this session.

"I think eventually Alaskans will have to pay taxes," Cotten said. But he wasn't sure whether legislators this session would take the steps to initiate taxation.

Also, some rural issues which could be directly affected by budget concerns are alcoholism and suicide prevention programs.

"Everybody in Alaska wants to see those problems solved," Cotten said.

"Not many of us are social science experts in regard to what programs work," he said. But he added that through hearings and testimony, the Legislature can determine which social programs should receive funding.

Rep. Niilo Koponen, D-Fairbanks, said he hopes state spending remains where it is, but that new programs will receive due consideration.

"Of course alcohol and suicide are going to be important social issues," Koponen said, but he added that budget problems could slow funding for some programs.

Two rural legislators, Sens. John Binkley, R-Bethel, and Al Adams, D-Kotzebue, say they are trying to coordinate hearings targeting post-mortem regulations.

According to aides for the two lawmakers, a teleconference from Juneau on the state post-mortem law is planned for this month. Also being considered are hearings in Kotzebue and Bethel, two areas where families are greatly affected by the state law.

The 1962 law calls for an autopsy whenever there is a suspicious death or a death unattended by a physician in rural areas.

It was amended in 1988 to give coroners or village magistrates the right to review an apparent suicide and decide the cause of death without a

coroner's inquest.

Cases other than suicide, however, still face problems.

When bodies are brought to Anchorage or Fairbanks for autopsy — where the post-mortem facilities are — families can be hit with unexpected funeral bills because they didn't understand exactly what services state law covers. In some cases, families are forced to pay for the expenses in order to get the bodies back for funerals in their home villages.

Funeral directors have defended their actions, saying that in cases where families can't afford services, they are forced to hold bodies from rural areas until payment is guaranteed.

Both legislators, however, say they must first decide if the current problem is simply caused by bad communication between rural families and urban funeral homes, or if legislative action is the answer.