

# It's going to be a tough legislative year

by Sen. John Binkley  
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — Today marks the beginning of the first session of the 16th Alaska State Legislature. It also marks the start of my third year as the state senator representing rural districts 24 and 25 and as co-chairman of the Senate Finance Committee.

## OPINION

One year ago today in this column I made a pledge to rural Alaska to stop the downward slide in the economy, to stabilize the budget and to allow the Bush economy to adjust to the decreases experienced in the past few years.

Like the rest of the state, rural Alaska has gone through some hard times these last few years. It's been tough dealing with fewer oil dollars to

spend, especially when the Bush economy has never been particularly healthy.

I am pleased that last year I was able to accomplish that goal. Services in rural areas have been maintained at their present level, and, in fact, some programs important to children and to our fish and game resources were given a much needed boost.

I wish I could be as optimistic this year as I was last and be able to promise a similar stability. Unfortunately, the price of oil hasn't been cooperating in the fashion I, and every other Alaskan, would like. And since the price of oil is as volatile as ever, I can't even predict with any great certainty the exact number of dollars that will be available to spend this May when the budget gets finalized.

But I do know without a doubt (and barring some unforeseen event that will send the price of oil rocketing through the roof) that this year we have to do one of two things, or a combination of both: cut the budget or raise revenues.

Cutting the budget is a painful process. Already the operating budget, which pays for such things as social workers, teachers and schools, and road and airport maintenance, is stretched to the limit from those cuts that have been taken since 1985.

And trying to get 60 legislators as well as the governor to agree on where to make the cuts is nearly impossible — as is trying to get all 61 individuals to agree on which sources to tap for increasing revenues.

But I do know what my personal bottom line is, and I will do everything in my power to hold to that: to protect those services and programs that help those Alaskans most in need. These include:

- Funding for education and other programs for children.
- Energy assistance for rural

Alaskans.

- Financial support for rural communities.

- Programs that help Alaskans develop economically and generate income.

Other than work on the budget, I'll continue working on these priorities this session:

- Continuing to press for further action to end the interception of Western Alaska fish on the high seas. I will work to ensure that Western Alaskans get adequate enforcement in their fisheries and quality management of their fish and game resources.

- Expanding local options so that communities will have all the tools available for them to use in fighting alcohol abuse. After all, before we can

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have a healthy economy, we need healthy people.

- Following up on the recommendations that will be coming from the Senate Special Committee on School Performance.

- Serving on the Governor's Interim Commission on Children and Youth and placing a focus on Headstart and how we can make it work better for rural Alaska and serve more children.

- Working with Sen. Al Adams, D-Kotzebue, in developing legislation as recommended by this newspaper in its series on autopsy and funeral requirements.

- Supporting our system of health aides that is so vital to the health of rural Alaska.

The decisions that need to be made this year won't be easy ones. I will need your help in representing not only those constituents in the districts I directly represent, but also in representing all Alaska residents.