

*Tundra Times Interview:* by Laury Roberts-Scandling

# Senator Fred Zharoff



*This interview with Senator Fred Zharoff, a Kodiak Democrat, is part of our continuing series of talks with members of the Legislature's Bush Caucus.*

*Fred Zharoff was raised in Kodiak. He attended Sheldon Jackson college and received his bachelor's of education degree from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. He has worked as a teacher, fishermen, laborer, cannery worker and grocery clerk. He has spent 17 years with the Kodiak Island School District, primarily teaching the middle grades.*

*He served three terms in the House of Representatives beginning in 1978 and was elected to the Senate from District N in 1984. He chairs the Senate Labor and Commerce Committee, and is a member of the Resource Committee and the Legislative Council. His district covers Kodiak, the Aleutian chain, the Alaska Peninsula and the Pribilof Islands.*

**TUNDRA TIMES:** What is the purpose of the Bush Caucus and what role do you play?

**ZHAROFF:** With the activities in the Senate we've been very busy involved with some of the major issues and we haven't been able to — at least I haven't been able to — spend as much time with the Bush Caucus as I would normally like to. The Bush Caucus is a spin-off from the Ice Block, which was a group that formed a while back to address rural needs, and it continues.

We're very much concerned about the activities of the village and regional corporations, the federal programs that directly involve our communities in rural Alaska and we're very vocal in terms of expenditure of state dollars. Senator (Frank) Ferguson and Senator (John) Sackett have been very watchful.

I guess what bothers me is that we have in the state communities that lack of basic infrastructure that we need to have a self-sustaining economy down the road. The entire District N is tied together by the fishing industry and we have communities that need the structures to support that — docks, harbors, shipyards. There are 11 school districts in Senate District N and they are spinoffs of the state-operated schools which were a spinoff of the BIA schools and those are the type of facilities we have out there. We have to do continuous work on them. It's a slow process, particularly with the declining revenues, to work on the basic needs package.

**TUNDRA TIMES:** Has the Bush Caucus had to pull together and work as a block on anything in particular? The last big thing that comes to mind is the coup in the House which occurred several years ago. Has the Caucus had to throw its weight around in the last two or three years?

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# Zharoff

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**ZHAROFF:** It's not as keyed up as it once was. It plays a very important role. Senator Ferguson more recently is promoting a \$100 million water-sewer package and I think without the strength and support of the Bush Caucus in its entirety it would be difficult to get something like that through. I think our concern now is looking at 1990 with the reapportionment. That may have the tendency to pull us (apart)— well, we'd be tied together, but I don't think the numbers would be as great, unless the state's population decreases. We're hoping that with the decline of state dollars and major projects, that we won't see the full contingent that we have in the urban areas, in terms of population.

**TUNDRA TIMES:** What kind of chance do you think the water-sewer package has in light of declining revenues?

**ZHAROFF:** I think it's going to be tied in with everything else. What it's coming down to is the availability of money we're going to have to work with. This \$100 million takes a substantial bite of what remains (for capital projects). It looks like we're going to be making further reductions in the operating budget as well. We may be looking at an additional \$750 to \$900 million reduction on top of what we already have. We do have the undistributed income account. The Senate passed putting the whole thing in the Permanent fund. I voted against that. I don't think it was a good idea simply because of the needs I expressed earlier.

**TUNDRA TIMES:** Let's talk a little bit about school funding. (Senator) Jan Faiks and maybe some other Anchorage Republicans are making some noise about having to make it more equitable, more balanced, that rural districts are getting too much money and it's not fair.

**ZHAROFF:** There have been several pieces of legislation that address a pro-

blem that's been around just about as long as I've been here — basically around the question of equity.

It's difficult to measure how much education (costs) in terms of dollars for somebody out in Atka versus somebody in one of the junior highs in Anchorage. I was concerned when the Department of Education came up with its original findings because they did give the urban areas the impetus to stand up and say, "See, we told you the funding was inequitable all these years." I've got some problems with that, particularly when I've got one district that would have lost about 30 percent and a lot of it was based on not having the same type of accounting system as other districts.

I think if we're going to look at more equitable distribution of funds the Department of Education has to come up with a standard measure of accounting. The governor's proposal, which is from the Department of Education,

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really doesn't do justice to the rural areas in the state. Their solution was to put in a "no harm" clause to where the districts wouldn't lose any more money than what they received last year and those that receive money wouldn't get more than ten percent of what they got last year. Of course, that would taken an additional \$27 to \$30 million dollars which would be, basically, a one-time-only appropriation; then we would be right back where we are next year.

**TUNDRA TIMES:** What can the Legislature do about Alaska hire, considering that essentially it may be unconstitutional? Can you tell people from another state they are not allowed to work in Alaska?

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# Zharoff

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**ZHAROFF:** It's going to be difficult. We're looking at a number of options. In one, Senator Faiks has a tax credit bill. We can offer some tax credits for industries, corporations and companies that hire Alaskans. If they hire Alaskans they get a certain amount of credit. We're looking at the possibility of maybe tying in some justifiable conditions like in the area of health and safety. We can make sure that people who are brought into the state for a specific purpose and put into some of our remote communities are not carriers of diseases. I think as a state we have that right to require the employer bring clean bills of health. From the legal aspect we're concerned about bringing people in the state that have a history of crime.

When you come right down to the constitutionality of it, it's difficult. Our court system here doesn't seem to take the state position in many cases. It puts us in an awkward situation because then we've got to appeal which is very expensive. We're working on the Red Dog mine now and we're hoping that everything is in place that will give preferential hire to the local residents.

**TUNDRA TIMES:** What about the pay raise for legislators? What's your feeling on that?

**ZHAROFF:** When you look at the position and amount of time we actually put in I don't think we're paid enough, at times. Other times it looks like it's sufficient. I voted for the raise when it was in the House, and, of course, it did pass. I have some mixed feelings. If you're going to have a citizen Legislature, you're going to have to pay people, otherwise you end up with people who either have pretty good retirements, or other sources of funds available to them, making decisions in the state. This gets away from the average person in Alaska being able to have more of an input.

It becomes pretty expensive to remain in the Legislature. Being in the Senate I've doubled my constituency and the size of the district increased four or five times and it takes a lot of time to travel.

This last year I wanted to supplement my income by substitute teaching and I put in one day. The rest of the time I was either tied up with legislative business, or travel in the district or the various interim committees. It's a fulltime position if you want to make yourself available to your constituents.

**TUNDRA TIMES:** How will you vote if it comes up in the Senate?

**ZHAROFF:** I'd have to take a good look at it. The concern is, of course, having it go out for a statewide vote. If it does go down you're back to the original salaries that we had three years ago. If it comes up as an initiative (and passed) you'd be looking at a two-year period before any changes could be made. So maybe to circumvent that, the possibility of repealing the pay raise and putting a salary commission together to review and come up with a recommendation may be a better alternative.