



## Alaska needs leadership

Alaskans are asking, according to a column from the Governor's Office in this issue of the *Tundra Times*, why can't Alaska be more like Kansas or Vermont or Utah?

This seems unlikely to us, but maybe that really is what people are asking the Governor's Office. We think there's a more important question, however, one that is absolutely critical. It is: Why can't we cut the budget?

We have some specific suggestions on just where to make these cuts. We offered some of these suggestions more than two years ago when we supported an attempt by Sen. John Binkley, R-Bethel, to reduce benefits for state employees. These ideas are just as relevant today. In fact, as more and more businesses in Alaska go bankrupt, they make even more sense.

Our first suggestion is to drastically reduce state employee health insurance, which today accounts for a whopping 5 percent of the total state operating budget. As big businesses all over the state continue to call for employees to pay a larger and larger share of health insurance benefits and as small businesses continue to offer *no coverage at all*, this state employee benefit is not only wrong, it's ridiculous.

Our next suggestion is to have state employees work a 40-hour work week, not a 37.5-hour work week. Maybe this shorter work week made sense at some point in our state's history, but it doesn't now.

Let's also reduce what even the Governor's Office calls "liberal" vacation, sick leave and retirement policies. And the geographic salary differentials should be brought into line with common sense.

Another good place to cut would be to make the Longevity Bonus Program based on need, not handed out to every person. Payments to senior citizens do make sense if the state can afford it, but they certainly don't make sense for every single elderly person.

These suggestions alone won't solve the budget crisis. We'll be offering more in future issues. It may be that some form of new taxes will be needed. But certainly these very basic cuts must be made, no matter what.

Alaska truly is unique, and trying to make this state into a Kansas, Vermont or Utah just won't work. It took courage on Gov. Cowper's part to suggest new taxes, something that is always unpopular. But what we really need is leadership in starting the process of cutting the budget.

We believe that a strong governor can help guide us through this difficult time of trimming the fat from the state budget.

Please Gov. Cowper, don't try to make us into a Kansas. Just give us some leadership on cutting the budget.

