

# Permanent Children's Commission sought

by Sen. John Binkley  
for the Tundra Times

More than a year ago I described in this column a new public consciousness regarding children in Alaska that developed as a result of the efforts of the Governor's Interim Commission on Children and Youth.

## OPINION

At that time, the Alaska Legislature made a firm commitment to invest in our children as one of our highest priorities.

We recognized that with one-third of the state's population under the age of 18, children are truly our greatest natural resource, as well as our human Permanent Fund.

They belong to us all, and all the care and resources we give them now will reap a far greater economic and social dividend for this state's future than all of its other financial investments.

Two years ago Governor Steve Cowper appointed the interim commission. Since that time, some major changes have been made in redirecting money and attention to reflect the growing commitment made by the state's leaders to care for children.

The commission accomplished a great deal. Members focused much needed attention on child care as a real economic need. The connection between good parenting and healthy, stable children was reinforced, with the acknowledgement that parenting is indeed a skill that is learned, and not something that necessarily comes "naturally."

A new dialogue was developed between state leaders and Alaska's young people, who will soon be the next generation of adults. New funding was provided for services to children from violent or abusive homes.

The Commission emphasized that community involvement at the local level had the greatest impact, and that rural Alaskans also need to be active players in their children's futures.

And finally the commission promoted the idea that prevention and early-intervention was probably our best investment in fulfilling our responsibility to our children.

These efforts have formed the foundation for developing a comprehensive service plan for children, youth and family. But they're only beginning. Many other urgent issues are still untouched, and that's why it's critical to establish a permanent Alaska Commission on Children and Youth.

The legislation creating a permanent Children's Commission got caught up in the last-minute politics of the legislative session and failed to pass this year.

However, Governor Cowper soon plans to sign an administrative order extending the life of the commission for a year, with funding to be provided by the Alaska House and by federal anti-drug programs.

The new commission will no longer have legislative members, instead, it will consist of four agency representatives and three public members that are still to be named.

In fact, if you're interested and represent a rural perspective, the Governor's Office is still looking for possible candidates.

The new commission will be given three very basic tasks:

- To update the initial report prepared by the interim commission



in January, 1988:

- To prepare a state response to youth substance abuse issues, specifically describing what is and what isn't happening in Alaska; comparing our state to others with high Native American populations; and making specific recommendations;

- To develop and distribute a legal rights handbook describing the laws, rights and responsibilities of young Alaskans.

Of course the commission members won't abandon other issues for which they've become advocates, such as early childhood education and community support systems.

In fact, commission staff will be actively involved in follow-up to the adolescent health survey now being completed by the Departments of Education and Health and Social

Services.

In addition, they'll be working with an inter-agency group that's examining the ways young people's home and social environments affect their academic performance in school.

We still need a permanent Commission to look at the long-term. Other states have established innovative financing mechanisms to ensure that children's services don't compete each year with other services in the annual funding battles. Alaska needs to join that effort.

In politics, we often refer to the "special interest groups" who lobby us — the oil industry, labor folks, environmentalists, and so forth.

What we need to remember is that children are not a special interest—they are a common interest of us all.

*We must continue the basic policy shift we started last year and continue our investment in our 'greatest natural resource.'*

And they are a common interest who can't vote or hold public office, who can't write budgets — who must count on us to represent their interests and look out for them.

We must continue the basic policy shift we started last year and continue our investment in our "greatest natural resource."

I sincerely believe that's the commitment Alaskans want to make, to seriously invest in our future generations. By making those investments wisely, we can ensure that today's children will be prepared for the 21st century.

*Those interested in serving on the Commission on Children and Youth can contact Sheila Gottehrer, at the Office of the Governor, P.O. Box A, Juneau, 99811.*