2021 CAPITOL CURRENTS

32nd Alaska State Legislature ~ 1st Session

First Edition
1/24/21

~ 32nd Legislature Opens with newly elected citizens to represent their districts and an organized Senate ~

NEW LEGISLATORS

We begin again. The Legislature convened Tuesday January 19th, with 13 new legislative faces. April 18th marks the 90th/last day of session as set by statute, but the Alaska Constitution allows for 121 days (May 19th). Click on a name below to learn about the new legislators:

Representatives
Mike Cronk
Ronald Gillham
James Kaufman
Christopher Kurka
Kevin McCabe
Ken McCarty

Representatives
Tom McKay
David Nelson
Josiah Patkotak
Calvin Schrage
Liz Snyder

Senators
Roger Holland
Robert Myers

To see your legislators, click here: AKLEG Photo Sheet

HIGHLIGHTS

The Senate has organized a conservative, non-binding caucus under Republican Senator Micciche with all 13 Republicans and one Democrat, Lyman Hoffman. Senator Hughes is the Majority Leader. Senator Costello, the Whip. Senators Stedman and Bishop will run Finance. Senator Stevens chairs Rules. Senator Tom Begich leads the Minority.

Look here for the list of committee members: Committees

Micciche calls it a diverse group representing a variety of perspectives. In case you are wondering: "non- binding" means folks are free to vote their conscience on the budget and other issues. Note that relative moderates are in leadership positions while more conservative members run the committees.

Historically, they comprise a mix of Majority and Minority members. While the new Majority followed this protocol for standing committees, only Majority members are on the Legislative Budget and Audit Committee and the Legislative Council. Left to see how this will play out.

The House is still trying. Republican Rep. LeBon was nominated for Speaker pro-tem. (Temporary Speaker). The motion failed 20 to 20: 20 Republicans supported LeBon, with 15 Democrats, one Republican, one Independent and 4 Non-Partisans opposed. Former Speaker Bryson is their candidate.

Lt. Gov. Meyer will preside over the House until the final deal.

We expect a progress report Monday. It took the House five weeks to organize at the beginning of the 31st Legislature -hopefully will be much sooner this go around.

COVID 19 Session Rules are in place. The public and lobbyists are banned from the Capitol. Staff and Legislators will receive twice weekly COVID tests and daily temperature and symptom screening. Plexiglass panels abound, including the House and Senate Floors where members are separated.

Gavel Alaska coverage has improved with 39 remote controlled cameras in Chambers and committee rooms. Now, they will stream or broadcast all events live in high definition with instant retrieval archives. Oral and written testimony will continue through teleconferences and email.

Masks must be worn in Chambers with fines for non-compliance. However, Legislators can set mask rules for their own offices. One media member at a time can observe House and Senate Chamber proceedings.

The previous Legislature's Budget and Audit Committee recently approved an audit of the federal COVID-19 relief money allocated through the state's small business grant program, including an audit of AIDEA board members.

Governor Dunleavy says he's upbeat about the state's ability to rebound from COVID 19 struggles. He also said Alaska has done relatively well throughout the pandemic and is the leading state in citizens vaccinated per capita.

In other news: The Recall Dunleavy group held a press conference to announce their final signature gathering push. They are 22,000 short of their 72,000 goal. During the pandemic, they received 30,000 mail in signatures. The group is looking for a July Recall Vote.

Meanwhile, the Governor says he will work with President Biden. But maybe not so much on resource issues important to Alaska, he added. His top priorities this year are to: Settle how permanent fund dividends are set; pass constitutional amendments for spending limits and public approval of taxes; and pass a bond package for infrastructure.

Let the Zooming and Live-streaming begin.

BUDGET ISSUES

15th Legislative Day (Feb. 2nd) Deadline for Governor to introduce budget Supplemental bill.

30th Legislative Day (Feb. 17th) Deadline for Governor to submit Amended Budget.

Governor Dunleavy wants to send checks out to citizens to help revive the economy. Under the current formula, the Permanent Fund Dividend is $3,060. He also proposes another $1900 to be paid earlier in the year to top off the $992 check residents received last year. Total PFD payout would be just under $5,000.

However, if the people, through an advisory vote he's also advocating, support a new calculation formula the total would be a smaller by hundreds. The Governor wants fast action on the PFD issue and an infrastructure bond package he's proposing, but the Senate says budget first.

Governor Dunleavy released his FY22 budget on December 11th.
See his press release here: A Path Forward FY22 Budget
See the budget here: FY 2022 Proposed Budget

Budget Proposals to watch

Health and Social Service

While there is a small overall increase ($1.8 million) to the Office of Children's Services (OCS) budget, they are proposing to close the Valdez and King Salmon offices. Valdez cases would be handled from Wasilla and the King Salmon staff would be switched to telework.

They also propose to cut grants from the "Circles of Support" program. On the plus side, money is being added for subsidized adoptions and guardianship support.

The Division of Public Assistance (DPA) will cut staff hired in 2018 to handle the backlog of applications needing processing, claiming the backlog is no more so no need for the extra employees. They also propose a reduction of another 100 jobs due to advances in technology, moving from in-person to electronic re-certifications and renewals of participant eligibility. Altogether, the overall reduction to DPA is about $10 million.

The Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API) will see a small increase. Much of the budget changes are a shuffle to prioritize hiring permanent staff to replace travelers and temporary providers. Seven vacant positions will be deleted, and the agency will look to hire a new clinical director and new human resources consultant.

Behavioral Health Treatment & Recovery Grants are reduced by approximately $3 million and Behavioral Health Prevention and Early Intervention Grants are down $200,000.

Justice System

The Office of Public Advocacy (OPA) is proposing to add four staff to keep up with legal caseload increases relating to criminal defense and other matters.

The Division of Community and Regional Affairs proposes to appropriate $360,346 from the civil legal services fund (AS 37.05.590) to the Alaska Legal Services Corporation (ALSC).

LAW proposes to hire new staff in each Judicial District to work sexual assault and sexual abuse of minor cases. The department says there are 1,020 such cases currently pending trial. COVID delays haven't helped. The additional staff is expected to reduce the caseload per sex crimes prosecutor from 68 to approximately 40 cases per prosecutor.

Corrections proposes establishing 13 new full-time positions within **the Health & Rehabilitation's Physical and Behavioral Health Care component** to meet the medical and mental health needs of the inmate population.

Services are currently being provided by utilizing contract, on-call non-perm, long-term non-perm, overtime and double-filled positions.

GOVERNOR'S CORNER

The governor's office will post press releases and other items of interest here: https://gov.alaska.gov/

On December 22nd, Governor Dunleavy announced his intention to reorganize the Department of Health and Social Services into two Departments.

See the announcement here: Governor to Reorganize DHSS

Once the Executive Order establishing the two new departments is introduced to the Legislature, they have 60 days in a **Joint Session** to disapprove the plan or it becomes law.

Part of the plan is to further divide OCS into two divisions. The Department plans to hold formal consultations with Tribal partners beginning in February to discuss the proposal. A meeting was held on January 6th in HHSS to discuss the issues: HHSS Discussion of Reorganizing DHSS

On January 18th, the Governor announced the appointment of Clyde "Ed" Sniffen to the position of Attorney General. Sniffen was named acting Attorney General in August 2020. Mr. Sniffen graduated from law school in 1988 and began practicing law in Anchorage. In 2000, he started working at Alaska Department of Law, serving as a senior assistant attorney general in the consumer protection unit, then as a chief assistant attorney general, deputy attorney general, chief of staff, and most recently as acting attorney general.

BILLS

The House has 67 bills and 2 joint resolutions waiting to be introduced and read across the floor after representatives are organized. The Senate introduced 29 bills and 7 joint resolutions Friday. They still have 16 pre-filed bills to introduce.

Click here for the bill list: Pre filed and Legislation introduced first week of session

Check back over the next reports to learn more about pieces of legislation, as they start moving through the process in their quest to become law.

WAYS TO FOLLOW HEARINGS

Check the committee calendar the day of the scheduled hearing as sometimes a bill is rescheduled at the last minute

Website-Daily Committee Hearings for Jan. 25-30, 2021
Weekly Schedule

Gavel to Gavel: Most committee hearings can be seen and heard on Gavel Alaska. It is broadcast on both local access TV and on the internet at Gavel Alaska Schedule - KTOO

Streaming Video
alaskalegislaturetv

Contacting your Legislator/Testifying

The Capitol building is closed to the public during the pandemic. There are no plans for in-person visits or testimony.

Contact your local Legislative Information Office (LIO) to learn how to participate in legislative hearings: LIO Offices

Click here for legislators' email addresses: Legislator Email Address List *(xls)*

~ End of Report ~

Contact: Caren Robinson (carenr@gci.net)