2021 CAPITOL CURRENTS

32nd Alaska State Legislature ~ 1st Session

Tenth Edition

~ COVID COVID COVID ~
~ Possible Budget delay ~Confirmation Hearings Rev-up ~

HIGHLIGHTS

The Coronavirus continues to dominate, and a political fight is brewing. In a letter to all legislators last week, Governor Dunleavy made it crystal clear he doesn't see a need for a disaster declaration but does want a small bill. He believes we are well on the road to victory.

The Governor argues it would be a big mistake to re-enter a state of disaster without an "apparent catalyst". It will "irreparably harm the trust Alaskans have placed in us". He said this move could also mislead travelers that our situation is deteriorating costing many good jobs this summer.

Instead, he told legislators he wants a targeted bill that would use temporary laws to distribute vaccines; provide limited liability to health officials; continue enhanced telemedicine; and allow the state to receive federal money like $8 million in family food assistance. Period.

Health care organizations, municipalities, businesses, and others disagree and oppose ending the declaration. Biggest concerns are about the governor's decision to drop mandatory airport tests and the state's ability to accept federal food aid for the poor.

Meanwhile, the House COVID-19 bill (HB 76) passed Friday 22 - 15. Rep. LeBon was the sole Republican supporter who's not part of the house coalition. It responds to many worries by retroactively extending the declaration to September 30,2021 and handles all other key issues (as we understand), not just the ones Dunleavy identified.

11 of 12 proposed amendments failed. They were offered by R's, including at least one containing the Governor's proposal. The only successful amendment prevented use of the federal COVID-19 money to pay for abortions that aren't mandated by state law.

Final debate summarized the divide. Opponents of the bill agree with Dunleavy - it goes too far and tramples rights. We are in recovery mode and should rely more on personal responsibility. They OPPOSE use of the disaster word. The kids and economy were most cited as reasons to move on.

Yes votes said this pandemic is a once in a lifetime situation and the threat level is still high. We must stay the course; keep Governor in the lead with flexible emergency powers but some limits on his authority; and set up an effective system that gets the job done. It now heads to the other body.

The Senate is more Administration friendly but not lock step. The latest version of SB 56 (HSS) ends the disaster emergency and covers Dunleavy's issues list, plus a few more including online charitable gaming and occupational/professional licensing. But has no mandatory airport testing. **It's up Monday at 1pm in Finance.**

New idea. The HSS Department is thinking about providing COVID-19 vaccinations to travelers at our busiest airports at least during the summer fishing and tourist seasons. They're looking for interested contractors who would provide a one-dose vaccine to willing travelers in a private, secure space.

The first 2021 COVID bill passed the Legislature last week. SB 24 (Wilson) will allow non-profits to hold meetings by teleconference and corporations to hold remote shareholder meetings. It's one of several pieces of legislation addressing state laws suspended during the pandemic.

Good news, bad news. Nearly 50% of Alaskan prisoners have received the vaccine but they need to hit 80% for "herd immunity". This is a challenge since the system is dealing with vaccination hesitancy and tight living conditions conducive to rapid disease spread. Alaska prisons remain closed to visitors.

Attorney General Treg Taylor appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee for a confirmation hearing. As expected, the committee focused on the Governor's handling of the pandemic, a topic that is near and dear to not so happy Chair Reinbold.

He defended the pandemic emergency orders but said our disaster act - with broad executive authority - works for events like earthquakes but is a "clunky tool" for a long running pandemic. The Legislature may want to look at changes based on our recent COVID-19 experience.

Too tough on crime, The Alaska Criminal Justice Commission recommends the Legislature adopt a "second look" law. This would give juveniles who were tried and sentenced as adults with life or close to life sentences a chance for parole after 15 years.

One Web Technology successfully completed its fifth satellite launch. They are hoping to cover 100% of the state by later this year. The primary goal to bring Internet access to rural and underserved communities. Alaska is the first step in their plan to go worldwide.

Another loss. Gail Phillips, Alaska's second woman House of Representatives Speaker, died at home Thursday reportedly of cancer. Born in Juneau in May 1944 as the first of seven daughters, she attended high school in Nome and attended the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Phillips was known as a member of the "Old Iditarod Gang" that helped create the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race.

Phillips served in the Legislature from 1991-2001 as a Republican representing the Kenai Peninsula. We worked together in the 1995-1996 session.

BUDGET

Penny foolish? Senators are starting to question the wisdom of SB 74, the Governor's general obligation (g.o.) bond bill. It made more sense last year but maybe not so much anymore since we're getting over $1 billion in new federal COVID aid. Congress also may soon pass an infrastructure-funding bill.

Borrowing is expensive. And, why put us into debt with the COVID aid available, said Senate President Micciche recently. The bill is in Senate Finance. The most recent draft proposes $303 million in bonds. HFIN hears the House version on Tuesday.

Rep. Spohnholz filed a bill, HB 141 Appropriation Limit; Governor Budget, that would implement a Republican favorite – a spending cap. This one is based on the average of state spending over the past three years with allowances for inflation and population increases. Cap exclusions include the PFD, school bond debt reimbursements, and emergency spending.

Both House and Senate Finance Committees say they won't finish operating budget closeouts until they get a better handle on the exact details of American Rescue Plan Act funding. This may take a while. As we understand, May 19 is the target adjournment date.

Budget Hearings for the week of March 29th

Mon, Mar 29th

9am	**SFIN** SB 56, Extending Covid Disaster Emergency and HB 76, Extending Covid Disaster Emergency-pending referral
1pm	**HJUD** HB 57 Funds Subject to CBR Sweep Provision

Tues, March 30th

9am	**SFIN** HB 76, Extending Covid Disaster Emergency-pending referral
11:30am	**(H)Ways & Means** Alaska's Revenues & Expenditures
1:30pm	**HFIN** HB 93 G.O. Bonds; State Infrastructure Projects

Wed, Mar 31st

1pm	**HJUD** HB 57 Funds Subject to CBR Sweep Provision

Thurs, April 1st

11:30am	**(H)Ways & Means** Revenue Projections; Alaska Permanent Fund

* Both House and Senate Finance committees show "bills previously heard/scheduled" in the daily calendar. Look at the Daily Calendar on the day of the hearing to see which, if any, bills are listed on the day.

BILLS ON THE MOVE

Mon, March 29th, 8am HEDC

HB 25 Public Schools: Social/Emotional Learning sponsored by Rep. Hopkins receives its first hearing. The bill creates curriculum standards within the Department of Education and Early Development to help guide school districts and educators as they incorporate social/emotional learning (SEL) into their classrooms.

Mon, March 29th, 9am SEDC

SB 111 Early Education: Reading Intervention sponsored by the SEDC committee will **also be heard in Wednesday's SEDC meeting**. The Academic Improvement and Modernization (AIM) Act does several things.

It establishes a financial incentive for districts to improve the quality of their early education programs by allowing districts to include students of high-quality early education programs in the foundation formula; and creates a targeted grant program for low performing districts that need to develop or improve their early education programs.

It establishes assessment tools to identify students that are falling behind then directs school districts to provide intervention services to those students that need it.

It adds six reading specialist positions at DEED that will work directly with teachers across the state to improve the quality of education in Alaska; requires the Board of Education to establish training and testing requirements in evidence-based reading instruction; and creates a virtual education consortium which will allow students that have done well working remotely to continue to do so.

Mon, March 29th, 1pm SJU

SB 9 Alcohol Beverage Control; Alcohol Reg

SJR 1 Constitutional Am; Guarantee Permanent Fund Dividend sponsored by Sen. Wielechowski

Mon, March 29th, 3:15pm HL&C

HB 151 Unemployment Benefits for Covid-19 sponsored by HL&C was introduced Friday and is already scheduled for its first two hearings-will also be heard in **L&C's hearing on Wednesday.** ***Public testimony will be taken both days***

Tues, March 30th, 8am H Tribal Affairs

HB 123 State Recognition of Tribes sponsored by Rep. Zulkosky will **also be heard in the committee's meeting on Thursday.** ***Public testimony will be taken.***

The bill amends AS 44.03 by adding Article 2. Intergovernmental Relations with Tribes. Article 2 says the State of Alaska specifically recognizes the relationship between the United States government and federally recognized tribes in the state. It further says the state recognizes all tribes in the state that are federally recognized under 25 U.S.C. 5130 and 5131.

Tues, March 30th, 3pm HHSS

SB 70 Opioid Overdose Drugs sponsored by Sen. Wilson receives its first hearing in the House.

Tues, March 30th, 3:30pm SSTA

SB 39 Ballot/Custody; Tampering; Voter Registration; Mail sponsored by Sen. Shower has been heard and held in SSTA off and on since January. The bill prevents the automatic sending of mail-in ballots by the state and municipalities and switches automatic PFD voter registration from an opt-out format to Opt-in.

GOVERNOR'S CORNER

Governor Dunleavy proclaimed March 24, 2021 as "Education and Sharing Day" in Alaska. Read the proclamation here: Education and Sharing Day

Governor Dunleavy sent a letter to President Biden this week asserting state management of the more than 800,000 miles of navigable rivers and 30 million acres of navigable lakes in Alaska, expressing intent for the State to exercise its authority to manage them and the related submerged lands under state law.

ITEMS OF INTEREST

HJR 14 Resolution: Fed Safe Banking Act/Cannabis sponsored by Rep. Rasmussen receives its first hearing, **Thursday, April 1st at 8am in HCRA**.

The resolution urges the federal government to adopt the SAFE Banking Act of 2019, sec. 110606 of the Heroes Act, or similar legislation that would provide a safe harbor for depository institutions that provide financial products or services to legal cannabis-related businesses or service providers in states that have implemented laws and regulations legalizing cannabis for medical or adult use.

Confirmation Hearings

For a list of the Governor's appointees released March 1st click here:
Boards and Commissions Appointments

Monday, March 29th, 8am	**HEDC** will consider Jeffrey Erickson and Keith Hamilton for the Board of Education; Danette Peterson for the Professional Teaching Practices Commission
Monday, March 29th, 1pm	**SJUD** will consider Todd Fletcher for the Commission on Judicial Conduct ***Public testimony will be taken*** and will consider Treg Taylor, Attorney General
Monday, March 29th, 1:30pm	**SL&C** has a long list of nominees to consider including Mindy Swisher and Sharon Woodward for the Board of Social Work Examiners; and Nicholas "Nick" Miller for the Marijuana Control Board
Wednesday, March 31st, 8am	**HEDC** will consider Lorrie Van Diest for the State Board of Education; Lem Wheeles for the Professional Teaching Practices Commission; and Ralph Seekins for the University of Alaska Board of Regents
Wednesday, March 31st, 1pm	**HJUD** will consider Larry Nicholson, Daniel Weatherly, and Joseph White for the Alaska Police Standards Council
Wednesday, March 31st, 1:30pm	**HFIN** will consider Rhonda Boyles, Brent Fisher, Anita Halterman, and Annette Gwalthney-Jones for the Alaska Mental Health Board of Trustees; Attorney General Treg Taylor
Wednesday, March 31st, 1:30pm	**SJUD** will consider Sam Cherot for the head of the Public Defender's Agency
Wednesday, March 31st, 1:30pm	**SL&C** among a long list will consider Richard Holt for the Board of Pharmacy
Wednesday, March 31st, 5:30pm	**SL&C** continues confirmation hearings and among others will consider Wendy Monrad for the Board of Nursing; Tammy Lindemuth for the Board of Pharmacy; and Bruce Shulte for the Marijuana Control Board
Thursday, April 1st, 3pm	**HHSS** will consider David Boswell, Larry Daugherty, and Richard Weid for the State Medical Board; and Rhonda Boyles, Brent Fisher, Anita Halterman, and Annette Gwalthney-Jones for the Alaska Mental Health Board of Trustees
Friday, April 2nd, 8am	**HEDC** will consider Sally Stockhhausen for the Board of Education; Jennifer Stafford, Adam Reid and Jamie Burgess for the Profession Teaching Practices Commission
Friday, April 2nd, 8am	**HL&C** among a long list will consider Brandon Ercanbrack and Mindy Swisher for the Board of Social Work Examiners

WAYS TO FOLLOW HEARINGS

Website: Daily Committee Hearings for March 29-April 2, 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 is closed to the public.

Contact your local Legislative Information Office (LIO) for questions. LIO Offices

You also can call using the following numbers.

Tell operator which hearing and bill number you are calling to testify on.

Here's the LIO call-in information for testimony:

If calling from a Juneau phone number: 586-9085

If calling from an Anchorage phone number: 563-9085

If calling from any other number: 844-586-9085

Click here for legislators' email addresses: Legislator Email Address List

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~ End of Report ~

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