2021 CAPITOL CURRENTS

32nd Alaska State Legislature ~ 1st Session

Sixth Edition

~ COVID 19 drama; Passing of 3 Former Legislators ~

HIGHLIGHTS

Governor Dunleavy had a bad week. He lost an experienced and effective Chief of Staff in the midst of a recall revival and came down with COVID 19. The Governor is now at home in Wasilla.

Tok Rep. Cronk (R) also tested positive, which required the house speaker to cancel most of Thursday and Friday in-person House and some Senate committee meetings. Tests and contact tracing are underway. Members who sat near Cronk are already in quarantine.

Just before these incidents, there was some discussion about relaxing Capitol COVID rules. The Legislative Council may still take that up but will need 8 votes for any changes, a fairly high bar. Mixed views have been expressed but caution is likely to prevail.

The Governor's Chief of Staff, Ben Stevens, resigned to take a job with ConocoPhillips as the vice president of external affairs and transportation. But there is a question about whether he received an ethics waiver from his former "agency head" that may be required in this situation. As we understand, he reports to his new boss Monday. Stay tuned as we wait for the AG response.

The state's COVID 19 vaccine allotment for March is 100,000 or more first doses with second doses coming right behind, according to Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Anne Zink. This will include Pfizer and Moderna batches. They are "super excited" to see the new shipment.

The jury is out on vaccine effectiveness against the new variants like the Brazilian and UK versions that have shown up in Alaska, but experts say they seem to protect against serious illness responsible for so many deaths and other miseries.

The Mat-Su has the highest daily case rate and one of the lowest vaccine rates. Rumors about federal assistance impacts were not exaggerated. We understand it's possible the state will forfeit millions if it doesn't have a public health disaster declaration in place by spring. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits are a particular worry.

A careful review is being conducted by lawmakers and health care providers of the Governor's 106 page Executive Order that would split the HSS Department in two. Commissioner Crum said it makes good sense to have a Department of Health and a Department of Family Services.

This would allow managers and 13 new employees to focus their energy. The proposal would cost $4.2 million for the second Commissioner's office. They say longer term savings are possible, working with stakeholders to find "nickels and dimes" across the board. The big cuts are done.

Following little testimony, the Senate State Affairs Committee moved three of the Governor's constitutional amendments, recognizing there are many more stops along the way. They include voter approval of tax increases; a tightened spending cap; enshrining the current PFD formula.

Dunleavy has said he won't support more taxes without a public vote on the approval amendment. All this will take time and could mean continued deficits for the next few years, according to the Governor's office. Senator Kawasaki says they are wasting efforts on these old ideas.

Bill Walker may try again in 2022. The former Governor recently disclosed that he's taking a close look at running and will decide after the Legislature adjourns, probably in the summer. Walker has been a visiting fellow at Harvard but says it's hard to sit on the sidelines with more work to be done.

We also learned last week that Permanent fund earnings are becoming an increasingly significant portion of our revenue stream and are #2 after Federal support. Oil Revenues are #3. The Fund's is now worth over $70 billion.

Rural and urban school districts are telling the government that lack of access to the Internet is a major barrier to online schooling. Senate Minority Leader Tom Begich, a member of the Education Committee, complained that the Administration is not on top of it.

Senate Finance talked last week about the lack of inflation proofing of the Alaska Mental Health Trust Fund. They urged the Board of Trustees to fix the problem to ensure fund durability over the long run.

Senate President Micciche is trying to patch things up between the Governor and the Senate Judiciary Committee (Chair Reinbold) with a better process that will get them back to "normalcy". He also said they are working toward a **90 day adjournment**, but anything earlier is unlikely due to a late House start.

We were deeply saddened by the passing of three former Alaska State Legislators. Flags have been lowered to half-staff through March 1st for former Alaska State Representative Hugh 'Bud' Fate, who represented Fairbanks from 2001-2005. Bud was a dentist, retired U.S. Army Corporal, and President of the University Board of Regents.

He worked on the mapping of the Alcan Highway. He advocated for the Alaska Native Community. He was instrumental in setting up the Fairbanks Native Association. He also fought hard for the establishment of high schools in the Alaska rural communities, which helped end the era of sending rural children to boarding schools.

Katie Hurley, a good friend and colleague of mine was also a mentor for many women, died at the age of 99. She represented Wasilla from 1985-1986 in the Alaska House. She began her political career as an assistant to Territorial Governor Ernest Gruening. She was best known for serving as chief secretary to the Alaska Constitutional Convention.

She also was president of the State Board of Education, and Director of the Alaska Women's Commission. Katie was Chancy Croft's (D) running mate in 1978 – the first woman to win a primary for Lt. Governor in the State. Flags will fly at half-staff Tuesday, March 30, 2021 for her 100th birthday.

And, more sadness as news spread that former Alaska State Representative Mike Bradner, 84 passed away Friday night from COVID-19 complications. Mike served in the House representing Fairbanks from 1966 -1976. He was Speaker from 1975 to 1976. Many remember him as the person who set up the Public Defender System. He was often seen in the halls of the legislature or hosting interviews on Gavel to Gavel. Mike and brother Tim publish the Alaska Legislative Digest that many read to stay in touch with key legislative issues. Flags will fly at half-staff this week.

BUDGET

Budget Hearings for the week of February 22nd

Mon, Mar 1st, 7:45am		Senate Health and Social Services Subcommittee
	9am	SB 8 Pre-K; Elem Ed Programs/Funding; Reading sponsored by Sen. Begich will be heard in SEDC
	9am	**HFIN** Continuation of Overview Governor's FY22 Budget Amendments; OMB Director Steininger; FY22 Fiscal Overview, Legislative Finance Director Painter
	1:30pm	**HFIN** Cares Act Funding Update
Tues, Mar 2nd, 9am		**HFIN** Continuation of Overview Governor's FY22 Budget Amendments; OMB Director Steininger; FY22 Fiscal Overview, Legislative Finance Director Painter
	11am	House Commerce, Community, Economic Development Subcommittee
	11:30am	*House Ways and Means*: Alaska's Revenues and Expenditures 1976 to today
	1pm	Senate Education & Early Development Finance Subcommittee
	1:30pm	**HFIN** Savings Account; State Debt; Investment Funds by Dept. Revenue, Pam Leary, Director of the Treasury Division and Deven Mitchell, Alaska Municipal Bond Bank Authority
	3:30pm	**SSTA** SJR 1 Constitutional Amendment: Guarantee Permanent Fund Dividend
	4pm	House Administration Finance Subcommittee
	5:30pm	Senate Corrections Finance Subcommittee will review Division of Pretrial, Probation and Parole; Board of Parole
Wed, Mar 3rd, 8am		House Education and Early Development Finance Subcommittee
	Noon	Senate LAW Finance Subcommittee
	1:30pm	**HFIN** Order of Operations; FY21 Supplemental Budget
Thurs, Mar 4th, 8am		House Corrections Finance Subcommittee
	9am	House Public Safety Finance Subcommittee
	9am	**SFIN** Alaska's Fiscal Position, Look Back and Projections, Legislative Finance
	11am	House Commerce, Community, Economic Development Subcommittee

11:30am	*House Ways and Means*: The Permanent Fund Investment Approach, Historical and Projected Earnings by Alaska Permanent Fund Corp.
1pm	Senate Education & Early Development Finance Subcommittee
1:30pm	**HFIN** K-12 FY22 Operating & Formula Walk-through by DEED; FY 21 Student Enrollment Counts and COVID-19 Federal Relief Funding
4pm	House Administration Finance Subcommittee
5:30pm	Senate Corrections Finance Subcommittee Division of Population Management
Fri, Mar 5th, 7:45am	Senate Health and Social Services Finance Subcommittee
8am	House Education and Early Development Finance Subcommittee
1:30pm	House University of Alaska Finance Subcommittee

BILLS On the Move

SB 70 moves to the House. SB 70 allows the chief medical officer of the Department of Health and Social Services to continue to issue a statewide standing order for the prescription of an opioid overdose reversal drug, naloxone. The authorization is set to sunset on June 31st, 2021. The bill removes the sunset so the program can continue. Watch for quick action in the House.

Mon, March 1st, 1:30pm SJUD

SB 82 Elections; Elections Investigations sponsored by the Governor receives it's first hearing. The bill would permit the Attorney General to investigate alleged election violations identified by the director of the Division of Elections, a member of the public, or by the Attorney General. A member of the public may submit a complaint alleging a violation to the Division of Elections within 30 days of the election or the violation, whichever is later.

Mon, March 1st, 1:30pm SL&C

SB 45 Age for Nicotine/E-Cig; Tax E-Cig sponsored by Sen. Stevens. SB 45 proposes two key policies: 1) to align state law with federal law in raising the minimum age to buy, sell or possess tobacco and electronic smoking products (ESP's) from age 19 to 21; and 2) to include ESP's under the wholesale tax structure in existence for tobacco products. ***Public testimony will be taken***

Tues, March 2nd, 1:30pm SHSS

SB 78 Health Care Services by Telehealth sponsored by SL&C.
Invite & Public testimony will be taken

Tues, March 2nd, 3pm HHSS

HB 76 Extending COVID-19 Disaster Emergency sponsored by the Governor was originally referred to HSS then FIN. The HSS referral was removed on the 19th when it was referred to FIN. It was scheduled for a FIN meeting on Friday, but that meeting was cancelled. It is now back on the HSS schedule pending referral and is **also on the HSS schedule for Thursday the 4th**.
Testimony Invitation Only

Tues, March 2nd, 3:30pm SSTA

SB 83 Elections; Voting; Ballot Reqs, sponsored by the Governor will be heard for the first time. It allows for increased post-election audits and stronger requirements for absentee ballot voter certificates. The bill would allow communities with populations of less than 750 to conduct elections exclusively by mail, instead of in-person. Additionally, it requires the division to determine the costs of recounts in regulation instead of statute.

Wed, March 3rd, 1:30pm SL&C

SB 9, Alcohol Beverage Control; Alcohol Reg, sponsored by Senator Micciche
SJR 9 Urge Exemptions for Cruise Ships sponsored by Sen. Kiehl

GOVERNOR'S CORNER

The Governor recognized Friday, February 26th as Child Care Provider Day

The Governor introduced SB 93 and HB 113, Health Insurance All Payers Claim Database (APCD) to mandate insurers and providers to disclose cost information. Data would be collected voluntarily from other entities such as self-funded payers (e.g., AlaskaCares and health care trusts). The APCD would be established within the Division of Insurance.

ITEMS OF INTEREST

HCRA will hear overviews of the Department of Corrections and the Department of Public Safety on **Monday at 8:00am**

HHSS will consider **Executive Order 119-DHSS Reorganization** on **Tuesday, March 2nd at 3pm**
Here is a FAQ on the order from the Governor's Office: DHSS Reorganization

The Redistricting Board will meet in executive session on **Tuesday, March 2nd at 3pm** to interview Legal Services RFI respondents.

H Tribal Affairs will hear a presentation on Layers of Governance on **Thursday, March 4th at 8am**

Confirmation Hearings

Tuesday, March 2nd, 1:30pm	**HFIN** will consider Commissioner Lucinda Mahoney, Revenue **SHSS** will consider David Boswell and Larry Daugherty for the State Medical Board
Wednesday, March 3rd, 1:30pm	**SJUD** will consider appointments to the State Commission for Human Rights and the Violent Crimes Compensation Board-nominees are not listed
Wednesday, March 3rd, 5:45pm	**HL&C** will consider Kelly Lucas, Board of Dental Examiners; Julie Endle, Board of Massage Therapists; Catherine Hample, Board of Nursing; James Henderson, and Tammy Lindemuth, Board of Pharmacy

Thursday, March 4th, 1:30pm — **SHSS** will consider State Medical Board nominees Maria Freeman; Lydia Mielke; Richard Wein; and Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority Board of Trustees nominees Rhonda Boyles; Brent Fisher; Annette Gwalthney-Jones; and Anita Halterman

Friday, March 5th, 5:45pm — **HL&C** will consider Mindy Swisher, Board of Social Work Examiners; Nicholas Miller, Marijuana Control Board;

WAYS TO FOLLOW HEARINGS

Note to our readers: *Each day, our legislators don masks and pass through temperature scanning kiosks before they enter their bubble to do our business in what has become a public free zone. Zooms, streams, texts, phones, emails, Gavel-to-Gavel and other work arounds are the best we can do to stay involved. We urge you to participate and make sure they know we're still watching!*

Website: Daily Committee Hearings for March 1-5, 2021
Weekly Schedule

Check Calendar Daily – Bills Can Be Rescheduled at Sponsor's/Chair Request

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

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
Click here for legislative staff contacts: Staff List

~ End of Report ~

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