

off the record

a legislative
update from
Senator Kim Elton

a bi-weekly way to stay in touch

Room 115, State Capitol, Juneau, AK 99801 ♦ 465-4947 ♦ 465-2108 FAX ♦ January 25, 2002

Capitol Undercurrents

Oops—the mists of history sometimes fog my memory. In an undercurrent item last week, I said Sen. Frank Murkowski served in the Jay Hammond administration. Not true! His state service pre-dated the Bush Rat governor. The senator served in the cabinet of Wally Hickel at the end of the '60s. Thanks to those with better memories—especially Bruce Botelho and Bill Corbus—for the correction. There is no need for them to join me in my remedial Alaska history course.

Pulling aside the veil of hell—

Rep. Joe Hayes of Fairbanks was in a major auto accident Tuesday that sent him to Bartlett Hospital for a couple of days with a concussion, sore ribs and a few lacerations. On Wednesday, Minority Leader Ethan Berkowitz used floor remarks to report to his House colleagues that after the accident Rep. Hayes regained consciousness briefly and, unsure about whether he was alive or dead, saw the goateed face of Rep. Con Bunde hovering above him. For a moment, E.B. said, Rep. Hayes thought he'd seen the devil and would have to



(continued on pg. 2)

Ted Stevens as birthing coach?

When I was on the legislature's deferred maintenance task force five years ago, I visited Anchorage's Muldoon Elementary School. I still remember the signs on the wall in the student commons room that said "Think", "No Put Downs", and "Good Feelings". I've often thought we should put similar signs up in legislative committee rooms.

Or maybe our signs could read "Stop the Bickering", "Don't Look at Party Labels", and "Do What We Can Do". That's the pithy advice Sen. Ted Stevens gave in his annual address to the joint session of the legislature Tuesday.

Good advice. Especially given the magnitude of Alaska's problems.

It seems when confronting the big problems, we're stuck on 'nothing' even though doing nothing is absolutely the worst thing we can do. Unlike those big, annual United Way thermometer signs that measure a community's progress toward a fundraising goal, each session our legislative thermometer starts at zero and never gets out of the thermometer's bulb. There's no progress on a growing list of issues: subsistence; the fiscal gap; the fault lines spreading between rural and urban Alaskans; and deferred maintenance on schools, roads, harbors, and airports.

All these are thorny, difficult issues. But they're issues that become even more difficult when we ignore them, when we stay mired in the bulb. There's been a disturbing legislative fixation on Mark Twain's advice to "never put off until tomorrow what can be done the day after tomorrow."

After all, we've wrestled with subsistence for a dozen years and still we've not come to a resolution. The feds are taking over. For a decade now, we've been spending from our savings and our savings will evaporate in two years,

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(continued on pg. 2)

birthing coach...

yet we still don't have any idea of how to balance spending with revenues. The bickering between regions of Alaska pushes us apart. And, unlike responsible homeowners, we've put off until the day after tomorrow, again, the cheap, preventative maintenance and now face ballooning, expensive deferred maintenance bills totaling close to \$2 billion.

Pogo, the comic strip philosopher who disappeared more years ago than I want to think about, once said "we is faced with an insurmountable opportunity." Maybe that's what's happening here. We know there is an opportunity to solve subsistence, to balance income with outflow, to understand our regional differences, and to fix schools and other facilities. But the opportunities seem insurmountable because we are fueled by bromides instead of hope.

Not Ted Stevens. Our state's senior elected official really is fueled by hope. He demonstrated that Tuesday. He didn't spend any time talking about problems during his address to the joint session—he spent all of his time talking about opportunities and solutions.

Better schools; telemedicine; tobacco control; more ferries; prisoners learning living and job skills so they don't recycle through cop shops, courts and prison; HeadStart and other early education programs; fewer Alaskans with FAS. He listed all of these goals and a host of others in his 40-minute speech. He talked about what we can do if we put aside bickering and party labels.

We've got to remember these aren't just Ted Stevens' federal goals. They are shared, Alaska goals. They don't happen with just his push, they happen with our combined push.

I've dropped one heavy clue about my age by admitting I remember Pogo and his swamp pals. Here's another clue: an early Bob Dylan once sang: "He not busy being born is busy dying."

It is time for rebirth in the legislature, and I'm comfortable with Sen. Stevens as our Lamaze coach. Let's stop bickering and breathe. Let's focus on policy instead of party. And let's bear down and push to solve problems that have been gestating too long.

undercurrents continued...

spend eternity in hell. The minority leader's report brought the House down, with Rep. Bunde laughing as hard as the rest. Rep. Bunde, in this instance, was playing the role of guardian angel. He had been among the first on the accident scene to offer assistance.

Tax misses target—The state chamber issued a press release opposing the governor's proposed \$30 head tax for cruise ship passengers a week ago. It "singles out one segment of one Alaska industry" said the release. The release is correct, it does single out a segment. But the major cruise ships don't pay any state taxes, including corporate income taxes in Alaska. It's only the smaller, U.S. registered boutique cruise lines that pay U.S. and state taxes.

Smart politics—When HB 285 (a bill adding a second verse to the Alaska Flag song) was on the House floor in third reading, the House Speaker noted that with nearly the entire body signed onto

the bill as co-sponsors there may not be much debate before final passage. Even so, the speaker noted, House Rules required that he open the floor to debate. Juneau's Bill Hudson immediately rose to his feet and asked the bill's prime sponsor, Rep. Carl Morgan, to sing the second verse. Rep. Morgan stood, cleared his throat, and said he would not sing the new verse because he wanted the bill to pass.

Second thoughts?—For a couple of years the legislature has been focusing on a rather strict regimen of 'missions and measures'. It's part of a performance-based budgeting process—designed to do for the body politic what a healthy diet does for the body of a politician. We've been working with an Outside consultant on performance based budgeting just like starlets work with personal trainers. Our

Outside consultant, for what it's worth, is a partner with the (in)famous accounting firm Arthur Anderson.



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