

Rep. Kapsner Column

By Representative Mary Kapsner

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Last week the House passed the Fiscal Year 2005 state operating budget to the Senate. The operating budget is arguably the most important policy document of the session. It tells us where our priorities are as a state for the coming year. It reaches into future years as well, giving us an indication of the type of state we are building for ourselves and our children.

The impact of this budget on our children and on Alaska's future weighed on my mind as I pressed the "nay" button on final passage of HB 375. We Democrats achieved some important successes this year by working cooperatively with our House Republican caucus. Funding was restored in the House budget to several important programs-public radio, satellite infrastructure, the subsistence division, some of the public health nurse cuts, and Alaska Legal Services, for example. Working with our Majority colleagues we sent to the Senate a separate funding package for education earlier in the session which, if passed, would give an important increase in funding to our schools and university.

I voted no on the state operating budget we sent the Senate, though, because it is an inadequate budget. Each year we talk about cuts made or cuts restored, but always from the vantage point of the budget we ended with the prior year. Instead of planning in a responsible way for our future (including how we will make sure all Alaskans have access to quality health, education, public safety services and basic infrastructure) we focus on how much money we have in our accounts. In the process, we are defaulting to a system of deferred maintenance in our social infrastructure.

The Governor's budget reduces alcohol and drug abuse treatment beds, for example. Even with restoration of some of the public health nursing cuts, Bethel is slated to lose nursing positions. Although the Public Safety budget numbers show no reductions to VPSO funding, too many communities continue to wait for public safety services-and inflation erodes the value of the dollars allocated. If we are unwilling to support those things that keep us healthy and safe and prevent problems down the road, we are deferring costs to the future-costs often seen in future years in more expensive programs and services.

When you think ahead five or ten years, what do you see in your future? What do you want for your community, your family? Each of us who are parents have goals for our children. Students graduating from high school are encouraged to think about their own personal interests and goals, often with the question, "Where do you see yourself in ten years?"

Alaskans have benefited from government services funded predominantly by oil revenues for the last twenty-five years. We're in a transition phase now, an important time for all of us to be asking:

*Where do we want our state to be in ten years, twenty years, fifty years?
What do we need from state government to help us create a quality of life
in our communities and as individual citizens that we aspire to?
What responsibilities do we bear in making sure we get there?*

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