

Time and again this session, I find myself returning to the issue of energy costs. There's a good reason for that – the need for energy, for electricity, light, and heat, has become a critical part of our modern lifestyle. What makes this difficult for us is the fact that the cost of energy is subject to large-scale, global economic trends and market forces that are impossible for us to control. The current high prices brought about by these trends are made even more difficult for us in rural Alaska by nature of our how remote we are, and the costs of transporting fuel to the communities that need it.

We're trying to deal with this issue in a couple of different ways down here in Juneau. In the coming year's budget, we still have an increase in funding for Power Cost Equalization (PCE), funding it at \$18.7 million in the House version of the budget, and at \$15.7 million in the Senate's version. It's not as much now as the \$20.7 million funding level we'd hoped for earlier in the session, but there is still some negotiating to do, and hopefully we'll be able to keep the House's higher figure. The Small Cities Energy Assistance program is also still on the table, and if it comes out of the upcoming negotiations intact, should also provide some relief this coming year.

Thinking about the long term, I went to Washington D.C. last week to meet with out congressional delegation. In meetings with our congressman and senators, I pushed for an endowment of federal dollars to shore up PCE, in order to provide a federal match for the state's efforts on this front. It's still too early to make any guarantees on receiving this federal funding, but I was encouraged by these conversations, and the potential for a secure and stable federal funding source for PCE is great enough that I will continue to pursue this angle.

I've found that one of the roadblocks to adequate energy relief funding (or for that matter, funding for just about anything) for the bush is a genuine lack of awareness on the part of many outsiders as to what it means to live out here. Many might have an abstract understanding that the communities of rural Alaska are small and physically distant from the major population centers, and that economies of scale and high transportation and shipping costs substantially raise the cost of living here, but the visceral understanding of what that means to an average family just isn't there. It doesn't hit them in their gut, and so it's not as difficult to balk at another million dollars for PCE or small cities funding in the face of concerns that are closer to their homes.

It was for that reason that I was so pleased with the trip home I took last month with the members of the House Finance committee. These legislators and staffers, some of them for the very first time, got to see life in rural Alaska, real and up close. Seeing a \$4 loaf of bread, or a \$6 gallon of milk, or a \$400 monthly electrical bill puts our challenges back into terms that people can understand no matter where in Alaska they may live.

That's why I'm turning to all of you now. I can't bring the entire legislature to the bush, but with your help, I can bring the bush to the legislature. In the next few weeks, I want to share your stories as we go through these final rounds of budget negotiations and sparring. I want to hear from tribal councils and city governments about what services and costs you have to cut. I want to hear from parents and grandparents about your heat and electricity bills, and what you're doing to pay them and feed your families. It's difficult, but these stories make a difference that can surprise you. I've already gotten quite a reaction from members of the delegation and the governor's staff

by telling them about how city staffers in Platinum have to wait until the afternoon to write with pens, because they've had to shut off the heat in their offices and the ink has frozen. These kinds of stories drive home the issues that we're dealing with in a very clear, unmistakable way.

So please, take some time to write down your own story, and mail it, fax it, or e-mail it to my office at the following address.

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