

The last days—actually the closing weeks—of this year’s legislative session reminded me of flying through a springtime storm. You feel the aircraft shift with changing wind patterns and are surprised by an air pocket here and there. And just when you’re expecting to land the weather at the landing field keep you circling in an interminable holding pattern.

The legislature’s holding pattern broke last week, after two weeks of what was routinely dubbed the “not-so-special” session in the capital halls. Nearly all the major decisions of this session were held over into the special session, including the operating and capital budgets and major policy debates. For our district, the capital budget is big news.

Eleven more safe water and sanitation projects were funded for villages in House District 38, airport improvements are slated for Bethel, Nunapitchuk and Tuntutuliak, along with other road projects for Bethel, and Kwigillingok. The bulk of the funds for these projects are federal, but the state still plays a vital role in funding the matching money and providing authorization for use of the federal funds in Alaska communities.

The Fiscal Year 06 budget also includes funding from the state’s general fund account for planning and design of a new Prematernal Home in Bethel, and an Eek landfill. On the heels of the dock collapse in Bethel we secured emergency funding for the immediate repair work and reconstruction.

A priority for Bush Caucus legislators every year includes funding for school construction and major maintenance, arguing that we need to keep whittling down the needs lists that the Department of Education and Early Development maintains. It’s been hit and miss over the years. It’s often a frustrating experience because most of rural Alaska can’t simply bond for a new school and ask the legislature to repay a portion of the costs—we rely on direct appropriations from the legislature.

This year the entire major maintenance needs list was funded. It was touch and go until the closing hours, but the capital budget that passed includes all projects. The compromise we reached puts the first part of the list into this year’s budget cycle and the remainder next year. That’s very good news for schools in the Lower Kuskokwim School District. Tununak, Bethel, Napaskiak and Eek deferred maintenance needs are included in the FY 06 budget and projects for Napaskiak, Newtok, Goodnews Bay, Mekoryuk, Kasigluk, Tuntutuliak, and Oscarville are in the FY 07 appropriation.

Improvements to the Bethel Youth Facility, the Courthouse, and Phase 2 construction of the Bethel Readiness Center are also included in this year’s budget.

Assuming none of our projects are vetoed, this means prospects for new construction-related jobs in our region are very good. It also means our workforce needs to be prepared and that our communities are there with follow through to make sure every dime we receive in state and federal money is well spent.

In that regard, I am especially happy to be able to report that the \$1 million request for Yuut Elitnaurviat, the People’s Learning Center, also made the final budget. Never before has the YK Delta seen the collaboration and the promise this project holds for developing a strong local workforce, and I’m happy the legislature has joined the effort to make sure the funds are there. The promise of Yuut is that we will be training and preparing workers for jobs for our region today and into the future.