

Honor seniors by keeping longevity

COMPASS: Points of view from the community

By Representative Les Gara

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Elected officials have a duty to work across party lines when it will benefit the public. I hope we can put aside our differences and join hands to protect the 18,000 senior Alaskans who rely upon, and have been promised, the longevity bonus. As I did on the House floor, I make this call on my colleagues in the House and Senate: When the governor exercises his promised veto of the Legislature's decision to continue the longevity bonus, let's return to Juneau to override that veto.

My Democratic colleagues in the House will return to override the governor's veto. That's 12 votes. I feel comfortable from discussions with Senate Democrats that they want to do the same. Now we have 20 votes. But we need 45 votes to override a governor's veto. Without support from the Republican leadership to convene a special session, and to provide 25 of their party's 40 votes, the Legislature cannot override the governor's veto. Members of both parties spoke passionately about the longevity bonus. It's time to honor our words and our seniors.

Elimination of the longevity bonus would be a huge mistake and an act of dishonor to our senior citizens. Our current bonus was passed by the Legislature as part of a promise made to Alaska's seniors in 1993. That year Alaskans debated the longevity bonus, and it was scaled back so that only Alaskans who reached age 65 by 1997 would qualify. The promise was made that no further cuts would be made. A former state senator confided in me that he feels the governor's proposal breaks the promise made in 1993 when the bonus program was last cut.

Thousands of senior Alaskans have retired from work since 1993 with the understanding that they'll receive checks that range from \$100 to \$250 per month through their retired years. Those Alaskans are 70 to more than 100 years old today. They can't go back to work if this promise is retracted. They had a right to plan their retirements based upon our promise of a modest monthly check.

If that doesn't sway you, maybe this will. If you haven't asked any seniors lately, their cost of living is high. Prescription drug prices have skyrocketed. In 2001, they rose 25 percent and they are projected to nearly double in price again by 2007. I've filed a prescription drug reform bill (HB 328) which I hope will pass, but this attempt won't stem the tide of steadily rising prescription drug costs. What about rent at senior living centers? A year at the Pioneers' and Veterans' Home costs more than \$24,000 just for room and board, and more than \$70,000 if you need nursing care. Private senior housing and nursing home arrangements cost as much, and sometimes more.

Former Rep. Mike Miller, D-Juneau, now receives the longevity bonus and commented that when seniors live at the economic margins in Alaska they are often one or two pension checks away from having to move out of state.

Not convincing? Well, what about this? As of 1999, seniors accounted for \$2.4 billion of Alaska's \$17.7 billion in personal income. Elimination of the longevity bonus will take more than \$40 million away from Alaska businesses. Combine that with the ramifications of decisions by the governor and members of his party that include the likely closure of the state's most respected correspondence school (at no or almost no cost savings); firing of staff at the Habitat Division which has protected our fishing streams so

well for so long; and a school budget that will result in layoffs of teachers -- roughly 60 in the Kenai Peninsula School District, and upwards of 25 percent of the teachers in some southeast communities, and you have another reason to honor our promise to seniors to continue the longevity bonus.

So I have two great hopes for the summer. First, I hope the governor doesn't follow through on his promise to eliminate the longevity bonus. If he does, then I truly hope the House and Senate's Republican leaders join to call a special session.

Rep. Les Gara is a Democrat from District 23 in Anchorage.