

## Why Democrats fight for bonus

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**Wednesday, August 06, 2003** - Eighteen thousand Alaskans older than 71 receive the Longevity Bonus, a way in which Alaska honors and repays contributions seniors made to building today's state and one that traces its origins to 1915. This summer, citing budgetary need, Gov. Frank Murkowski vetoed funding for the program.

Alaska Democrats called for a special session to override the governor's veto because we believe that the Longevity Bonus represents long-standing Alaska values, because we believe that the bonus constitutes smart policy and because we believe, as the poet Robert Service said, that a promise made is a debt unpaid.

The history of the Longevity Bonus goes back almost 90 years. In 1915, before World War I, the Territorial Legislature appropriated \$12.50 per month to every eligible Alaska senior who declined admission to the Pioneers' Home at Sitka. That program lasted through tough times: the Depression, World War II, statehood and the '60s. It overlapped for a brief period with the current version of the Longevity Bonus, which began in 1973.

In the years that followed, before a court case in 1984 opened eligibility requirements and before oil money began flowing, the Legislature appropriated between \$10 million and \$47 million to Longevity Bonus recipients. In 1996, facing budgetary constraints, the Legislature ended admission to the Longevity Bonus Program, but at that time the state promised those in the program that their checks would last their lifetimes.

The Murkowski administration deleted the Longevity Bonus Program with scant regard for the seniors affected and without analysis of the role it plays in local economies. When you claim to run government like a business, simple cost-benefit analysis should be part of every policy calculation.

Many seniors counted on the Longevity Bonus when they made retirement plans. The seniors, most on fixed income, relied on the government's promise and used the bonus for life's necessities. Longevity Bonus money cycles through the economy at a high rate. It pays for grocers, pharmacists, landlords, health care and child care.

These seniors are our relatives, our friends and our neighbors. They play a vital part in our communities, and it is cruel and wrong to treat them with anything less than the utmost respect. In too many cases, the Longevity Bonus is the difference that allows seniors to make ends meet--and to face life's challenges with dignity and self-reliance.

It is also foolhardy to discount the effect Longevity Bonus money has on local economies. If you own a business, consider how much seniors contribute to your income. A 1993 study showed that the Longevity Bonus played a large part in sustaining the prosperity of the Mat-Su Valley. No recent statewide analysis exists.

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The governor's veto is particularly irresponsible because it was done without studying its impact on local economies, many already reeling from other cuts. The Murkowski administration simply can't tell you how Fairbanks will be affected, because they haven't done their homework.

Promises don't really count for anything unless they are hard to keep. The promise made in 1996 to bonus recipients is hard to keep in today's tough economic times, but tough times are no excuse for breaking a promise.

Regardless of whether you are directly affected by this cut, it makes you wonder what other commitments the administration will break for budgetary expedience, what other promises will be tossed aside as "inconvenient."

The legislative majority included the bonus in the budget it passed. The governor took it upon himself to veto the funds, and we called for the special session because we took the majority at its word that they supported the Longevity Bonus as part of its budget.

Unless they intend to abdicate legislative power, the majority should stand up for its budget or else explain why the legislative budget process was not simply a sham and the majority a rubber stamp for the governor.

We have three separate, co-equal branches of government and, under our system of checks and balances, it is up to the Legislature to intervene when the governor does Alaska wrong. That's where the buck stops.

The recipients of the Longevity Bonus earned it--just look around at the state we live in today and think of the work it took to make it that way. We owe it to them and to the legacy we leave for our children to keep Alaska's faith with our seniors. Keeping your word and honoring our seniors are the kinds of simple, enduring values that make Alaska great. That's why Democrats are fighting for the Longevity Bonus.