

# A 2003 Legislative Summary By Representative Les Gara

This past session Gov. Frank Murkowski and the Legislature's majority called for "sacrifices" from children, seniors, workers, disabled Alaskans and those who seek treatment for alcoholism and drug abuse. At the same time they gave tax breaks to Alaska's largest corporations, increased the money lobbyists and wealthy donors could give to politicians, and sided with those who wanted to scale back Alaska's minimum wage.

The governor and members of his party recently have written to praise the results of the 2003 legislative session. I wish I could feel so good about those results.

When legislators worked across party lines this year, Alaskans benefited. But with Republican Party control of the governor's office and Legislature, much of what occurred was decided in closed party "caucus" meetings, without public debate. Here's some of what occurred and what we'll pay for in coming years.

School funding was cut this year. Since 1998, funding, adjusted for inflation, has fallen by 4 percent. Democratic legislators proposed to make up for the losses but were outvoted along party lines. Our proposals were based upon the recommendations of a bipartisan panel of educators. Their 2001 "A+ Report" noted the obvious: that class sizes are too large too often.

The governor and a few legislators have claimed they increased education funding this year. In fact, legislators increased one component of K-12 funding but decreased other components by more than that amount for an overall cut. Community school, kindergarten, correspondence school and other funds were eliminated or cut, as was the formula for funding local school transportation costs.

And so much for making our roads and neighborhoods safer. The governor cut the state's contribution to local public safety funding in half and drastically reduced police protection in rural Alaska.

While Alaska has some of the nation's worst alcohol and drug abuse problems and highest rates of child sexual abuse, funding has been taken away from The Salvation Army's Detoxification Unit and from needed sexual abuse victim outreach programs. Funding has been cut from needed literacy, after-school, alcohol and substance abuse, Alzheimer's treatment and disability services. This \$500,000 in immediate savings will be eclipsed in coming years by the cost to our communities, hospitals and jails.

So who will benefit?

More than \$50 million in tax cuts were given to oil and gas companies, much for fields that would have been developed without any tax givebacks. And the governor has proposed to spend Alaska's oil lease revenue on more than \$200 million in wilderness roads.

Heeding complaints from influential developers and industry members, Alaska Department of Fish and Game Habitat biologists who properly questioned projects that threatened our fishing waters were fired. Their remaining peers were placed under the control of the state agency responsible for commercial development. Every Fish and Game commissioner since statehood fought this move.

What about revenue? Every majority tax and revenue proposal favors our wealthiest citizens to the detriment of everyone else. Their sales tax and gambling tax proposals and the increases in motor vehicle, business license and recording fees they passed all require working and senior Alaskans to pay as much as their wealthiest neighbor.

Fairness requires that we not hit average Alaskans so hard. Before we ask Alaskans to pay a tax, we need to reconsider \$70 million to \$100 million in severance tax breaks allowed on our most profitable satellite oil fields. A windfall oil profits tax would let Alaskans share more fairly in billions of dollars in profit that oil companies make when, as now, crude oil prices are high. And instead of forcing a regressive sales tax into local communities, we should allow Alaskans to vote between a sales or income tax to go into effect when our savings account nears empty.

We must work to find true waste in government. I've done that. I'd just disagree that schools, police protection and the longevity bonus are "waste."

We can provide opportunity to our children, treat our seniors with honor and make our communities safer. But building a great state requires that we do better than take from average Alaskans and give to those with the most influence.

