

# Voters should fill vacant Senate seats

**By Representative Harry Crawford**

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A number of events would occur if Congressman Don Young vacated his seat tomorrow. Gov. Murkowski would have 90 days in which to take action, but his time would not be spent making short lists and courting Alaska's best and brightest Republicans. Murkowski would be bound by law to hold a special election to fill the vacated Congressional seat. He would have to trust the people.

The difference between the methods used to fill vacancies in the U.S. House and U.S. Senate became evident last year when Murkowski selected the replacement to his own vacated Senate seat. In the weeks after his decision to appoint his daughter, Lisa Murkowski, letters from across the state filled the Daily News Opinion section. There were allegations of nepotism, threats of voter retaliation and a general cry of "foul" from the public. It rapidly became apparent that many Alaskans think voters should be the ones to select the person serving Alaska in the U.S. Senate.

My colleagues and I have filed a petition with the Division of Elections to place an initiative on the 2004 ballot that, if passed, would allow Alaskans to fill a vacant U.S. Senate seat by special election. Petitioners have only until early January to collect the 24,000 signatures needed to place the initiative, called "Trust the People," on the ballot. Before volunteers can begin gathering signatures, Lt. Gov. Loren Leman must certify the petition. He is required by our state Constitution to do so if he finds the petition to be in "proper order."

To ensure proper order is found, Leman referred the petition to Attorney General Gregg Renkes, who has, in turn, referred it to one of his assistants, where it now lies in peril of being delayed to death. If the petition is not given due process and certified soon, the time in which to gather signatures will grow impossibly brief, preventing the question from being on the ballot.

Certification is not a matter of whether or not Leman or Renkes agree with the principle behind the petition, nor is it a question of whether the initiative should be on the ballot. Leman's certification simply indicates the documents submitted to the Division of Elections are in order. Since this initiative would employ exactly the same method currently in statute to fill U.S. House vacancies, the review by the attorney general's office should be concise, and certification should be expedited.

Unfortunately, the lieutenant governor and the attorney general have the ability to hold this initiative as a political hostage. All they need to do is allow the Juneau bureaucracy to drown the petition in referrals, reviews and reports until there is too little time to gather the necessary signatures. Using their positions to delay a process constitutionally guaranteed to Alaskans would be a serious misuse of power. Permitting Alaskans to have their say is fundamental to good government.

Each person who wrote a letter to the editor last winter, or griped to a neighbor, or complained to a spouse about the governor's appointment should be outraged. Everyone who believes our constitutional rights should not fall victim to a political tug-of-war should speak out. All Alaskans who would like to think their votes matter should call or write Leman and Renkes. Tell them that inaction on this petition will not be accepted. Then, the decision of whether or not the initiative should be on the ballot will lie where it belongs -- in the hands of voters.

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