

Keeping promises mark of leadership

Rep. Ethan Berkowitz

"I am transmitting a bill that phases out the Longevity Bonus Program over a several-year period... . This bill protects current bonus recipients, and those future recipients who turn 65 before January 1, 1994, by providing that they will receive \$250 a month for the remainder of their lives I am proposing this phased elimination because many Alaskans who will be reaching 65 in the next four years have counted on the bonus in planning for their retirement, and an abrupt termination of the program would not be fair to them."

- Gov. Walter J. Hickel, in his letter of transmittal, signing House Bill 81 into law in 1993

"A promise made is a debt unpaid."

Robert Service wrote it, and honorable Alaskans respect the pledge of a handshake, the commitment of giving one's word. That's why abandoning the 1993 promise to recipients of the Longevity Bonus runs counter to values that we teach our children to hold dear.

Even those who disagree with the merits of the Longevity Bonus should oppose a retreat from a promise made to Alaska seniors, the youngest of whom is now almost 75 years old. What Gov. Hickel recognized as "not fair" in 1993 is unconscionable in 2003. The 17,000 surviving seniors who counted on the promise made in 1993 deserve better. Those who are not seniors should pay attention, as well. If seniors can be targeted, no one can be sure that other promises won't be broken and other Alaskans sacrificed for budget expedience. The litmus test of convenience has no place when deciding whether to honor commitments. Over the long term, damage to the government's credibility harms Alaska's ability to conduct business. Promises only count when they're hard to keep, and keeping a promise is an important measure of character.

Importantly, no economic analysis accompanied this cut, and many questions about it remain unanswered. Though the Longevity Bonus cost \$44 million, the decision to cut it saves nowhere near that amount. More than 7,000 seniors now collect "Alaska Senior Assistance" - and honest accounting must deduct the dollar cost of that new welfare program from alleged savings. Other hidden costs also have emerged - costs that have not been directly accounted: For example, how many seniors went without food or medicine because a lifetime of pride prohibited them from taking a handout, and what increased hidden medical and housing costs that had been borne by individuals now add to the cost of other government programs? One must also ask why the new program penalizes married seniors, since unmarried seniors living together receive more than a married couple. Finally, no one has studied the effect of the Longevity Bonus as it flows through the state's economy - what businesses and what regions will be adversely affected? It is irresponsible to cut the budget and ignore the impacts to real Alaskans simply to reach a bottom line. The financial and social cost of this cut exceeds the benefit.

Leadership frequently means making tough choices, but tough choices should never be made callously or recklessly. The 1993 promise endured for 10 years before the administration did away with the program. What they did was insulting and unfair. That's why Democrats are fighting to restore the Longevity Bonus - because we believe in keeping our promises, and we know that there are better ways to balance the budget than to take it out on seniors. Ultimately, this isn't about party politics, it is about doing what's right.

That's why, when I walk down the street and run into seniors, I'm proud that I can look them in the eye and say, "I'm fighting for you."

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