

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE



REPRESENTATIVE JOHN DAVIES

House District 29

SPONSOR STATEMENT

House Bill 53

“An act establishing the Alaska Seismic Hazards Safety Commission”

A Seismic Hazards Safety commission needs to be established to address the pressing need to provide a consistent policy framework and a means for ongoing coordination of programs and public safety practices related to seismic hazards. Currently this need is not being addressed by any continuing state government organization. The seismic Hazard Safety Commission would encourage long-term progress toward mitigating the effects of earthquakes.

Alaska is on the edge of the Pacific Plate, which acts like a relentless conveyor belt, moving about six centimeters a year. It is inevitable that there will be large earthquakes, the only question is when will they occur, not if they will occur. Although the state has made great improvements in disaster preparedness there has been little corresponding improvement in measures to reduce the disaster potential of major earthquakes and, consequently, to reduce dependence on disaster relief. Creating a seismic commission patterned after those in California, Oregon, Washington and other states on major fault lines will help address the issues. If you prepare for a major earthquake ahead of time and prepare appropriately, when the earthquake does occur less damage will result, less lives will be lost and the cost of recovery will be less.

Through ten years of experience as state seismologist I have extensive knowledge in this subject area. I have first hand experience with the difficulty of coordinating earthquake information for the university and state, federal, and municipal governments. Anchorage does have an active geo-tech advisory commission, but the state needs to strengthen that work while broadening efforts throughout the state. A Seismic Safety Hazards Commission can provide that strength.

The scientific community is working hard on earthquake prediction, but it is not yet a reality, except in the most general sense. We can predict in a probabilistic way where earthquakes are likely to occur so we can focus resources in those areas, but in terms of knowing the date and time of occurrence of earthquakes we will not have that information for some time, if ever.

The state can mitigate possible effects of earthquakes by encouraging appropriate land use and building design so it can reduce loss of life and property, as well as the costs of recovery when earthquakes occur. It costs a lot of money to rebuild after a large earthquake and, of course there is no way to replace lost lives; so it is clearly worth spending some time and money before earthquakes occur to prepare for them. If mitigation efforts are undertaken at the time a building or subdivision is in the planning stages, the costs are relatively minor compared to retrofit or rebuilding. This commission would help our state be better prepared.

Members of the commission would be appointed by the governor to represent the university and governmental agencies, as well as members of the public who are knowledgeable in earthquake hazard mitigation. The commission would recommend to the public and governmental sector goals and priorities for reducing earthquake effects. The commission may accept grant contributions and appropriations from public agencies, private foundations, and individuals. The authority and responsibilities of other state agencies, boards, councils, commissions or local governments are not intended to transfer to the Alaska Seismic Hazards Safety Commission.