

off the record

a bi-weekly legislative
update from
Senator Kim Elton

Room 504, State Capitol, Juneau, AK 99801 ♦ 465-4947 ♦ 465-2108 FAX ♦ December 31, 1999

Capitol *Undercurrents*

Oh, sure it's a typo . . . Mild chuckling has been heard in the Capitol over the dilemma of Republican big-wig and initiative petition sponsor Ken Jacobus, Mat-Su attorney at law, who wants the Attorney General to fix his goof. Turns out the petition to cap property taxes would also end municipalities' ability to levy business inventory and property taxes. In response to the AG's refusal to rewrite a petition already certified by the Lt. Governor, Jacobus responds "common sense must be on life support down there". Gee, Ken, life is tough. Competent legal help must be in short supply in the Mat-Su Borough these days.

Outta gas . . . Legislative work on the BP merger has sputtered to a stop as a result of empty coffers. Experts hired by Leg Council aren't taking any more calls from Federal Trade staffers since money ran out on their state contract. With millions at stake, and the administration pushing the merger, voices on the other side have fallen silent.

There goes the neighborhood . . staffers on the fourth floor of the capitol watched the newest (Re-

Happy New Year!

Wish list for a new century

At the turn of the last century, Juneau and Douglas were two muddy mining camps connected by boat. Between then and now we: became the territorial capital and then state capital; saw the commercial fishing industry bloom, fade and begin to bloom again; ended institutional racial discrimination; fostered a strong art community; built a university system; watched mines close; became connected by ferry to our neighbors; and 'adopted' as Juneau icons famous sons and daughters as diverse as the Birdman of Alcatraz and Olympic downhill skier Hilary Lindh.



We don't know what the next century brings, but there are things we can do to create a brave new world. Here's my shortlist of things I hope for in the next century.

Let's ride the information highway to a new economy.

Fiber optics, the Internet and a rash of other technologies offer challenge and opportunity. Even though our merchants must compete with warehouses around the world stocked by dot.com businesses, Alaska's geographic isolation is no longer a barrier to growth. In fact, in many ways it becomes a "plus".

By taking advantage of Juneau's natural beauty and small town friendliness, we can attract new on-line professionals and businesses who want to live in a culturally diverse, safe, and thriving community that is a gateway to the best nature has to offer. The new world of e-commerce can expand our retail and service sectors and balance Juneau's heavy reliance on government employment.

Let's do for kids what we did for seniors. In the last third of this century, we did a great job enriching the lives of millions of seniors across America. Just 50 years ago, one out of every three elderly persons lived below the poverty line. Today, 'just' one in ten does. But one in five children live in poverty and the net change in that poverty range is zero percent over the past several decades.

Today, we know more about brain development and the im-

Undercurrents (cont)

publican) member of the minority, Rep. Scott Ogan, trade offices with Bev Masek, the new co-chair of House Resources Committee. He'll lose staff and other perks because he bolted from the GOP led House majority.

Enlightened, inspired political leadership—Marple's Business Newsletter asked last month: "Why worry about a state with \$30 billion in the bank?" Then the newsletter succinctly answered: Alaska's economy is stagnant; Alaska's per capita income has fallen below the national average (we were 48 percent higher than the average as recently as 1982); and Alaska's natural resource output—oil—is declining. The business newsletter, which has covered business in the PNW for 50 years, says Alaska needs to invest in infrastructure to create a climate attractive to new-economy businesses (the tech and information businesses fueling growth in Portland, Seattle and Boise). They suggest the infrastructure investment should begin with the university to stem a brain drain from the state. They acknowledge "investing" at a time when many want to "cut" will take "enlightened and inspired" politicians.

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Wish list (cont)

portance of early learning than ever before. While education is a lifelong process, what happens in the first few years limits or enhances learning in later years. Good health, good schools, loving families and caregivers, and safe neighborhoods are the petri dishes that will support successful, productive families in the future. Government at all levels has a stake, and a role, in helping kids succeed. Children whose cognitive and emotional growth is stunted will never thrive in the next century.

Let's create a criminal justice system that is more than a warehouse. What can we infer about a society where more prisoners are released into Alaska communities each year than graduate from Alaska high schools? Something is seriously amiss and it has, of course, a profound social cost. Increasingly, it is a budget buster as well.

I'm frustrated that more than three-quarters of Alaska's inmates are jailed because of crimes they committed under the influence of, or as a result of addictions to, alcohol and other drugs. I'm outraged when they leave the prison system with the same addictions they brought with them. I don't understand a legislature that won't mandate treatment for inmates with addictions, mental illness or personality disorders. Maybe a new experiment in Arizona can be a template for Alaska's leaders. Arizona voters defied politicians and voted twice, by large margins, to make their state the first to guarantee treatment, not just prison. Sure, the up front costs are more than nominal, but the downstream savings will be even more significant. And it's the only sure way to secure safer communities.

Let's create a political culture that replaces gamesmanship with real goals. Today, government is less able to achieve great things and is less trusted in the doing of them than ever before. Former Senator Bill Bradley, now a thought-provoking underdog candidate for president, believes that many Americans see political parties less as agents of reform and more "as vessels by which the poison of partisanship is injected into our politics."

I believe many Alaskans, too, are distressed by a legislative and media culture that focuses more on gamesmanship than policy. The huge responsibilities of government are not met with political sound bites or assertions of virtue. Elected officials who synthesize policy debates into either, and media mavens who simply repeat the sound bites or assertions in a "he said/she said" manner without any policy context, do a disservice to Alaskans who want to thrive in the next one hundred years. As we start a new century, let's set aside personal politics and work toward a greater good. It's the only way we'll secure the bright future all Alaskans wish for.