

## **Alaskans deserve full disclosure new bill would provide**

COMPASS: POINTS OF VIEW FROM THE COMMUNITY

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Alaskans want to believe that those serving in the Legislature do not attempt to influence the process for their own benefit. I feel confident that the vast majority of individuals who enter into public service do so to serve the public good and would never use their positions for private gain. I know I bristle when I hear people say that legislators are corrupt or when they speak of politicians with scorn.

Alaska statutes require legislators and legislative employees to "conduct the public's business in a manner that preserves the integrity of the legislative process and avoids conflicts of interest or even the appearances of conflicts of interest." So the fact is, when we make the choice to serve in public office, we have to open up our lives to a high degree of scrutiny. What was once our personal and private business has to become public information.

Disclosure of our financial relationships is important not just because the law requires it but also because for government to be truly effective, it must have the trust and respect of those it serves. Transparency, openness and honesty are the hallmarks of a good government and of its servants. The public has to have the tools to evaluate how we make decisions and where our allegiances lie.

Over the past few years, our own state has mirrored a disturbing national trend, with a number of high profile cases of questionable ethical conduct, some of which involved only perceived conflicts of interests and potential improprieties. These cases in particular have highlighted the need for refinement of Alaska's ethics code.

Perception is a powerful force. Even when there is no technical conflict of interest, the very perception of one casts a shadow on the whole of government and those in its service. Whenever we have the opportunity to prevent a conflict of interest or the perception of one, I believe we should do so.

This is why I have introduced House Bill 461. It is a simple bill designed to strengthen our current ethics statutes by clearing up what has been called a loophole in current disclosure requirements.

Under current legislative ethics statutes, a public official must disclose any compensation greater than \$5,000. A simple one- or two-word description such as "consulting" or "business services" is, by current law, sufficient to explain even a \$100,000 contract.

These bare bones descriptions are not enough to completely avoid the "appearance of conflicts of interest" as our state law suggests. In fact, because they lack the necessary explanatory details, disclosures have been raising more suspicions than they assuage.

HB 461 addresses this problem. It adds language requiring filers to provide enough information about the compensation they receive so the general public can understand what specific services were performed for it, as well as the approximate number of hours spent doing so. This requirement would apply to all legislators and is not intended to single out individuals.

Supplying this additional information simply provides the public with the level of disclosure they have repeatedly asked for and should have from their public officials. By honoring this request, we, as public officials, can encourage the public's trust, respect and confidence in their government.

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