

There They Go Again

By Rep. Vic Kohring

June 24, 2005

A recent editorial by critics of the Legislature dismissed in a pen stroke the entire work of the Legislature's special session, by throwing out the proverbial baby with the bath water. Working long hours, much good was accomplished despite the criticism.

We were accused of making "a lot of sausage." Here's what we actually did:

Public Employees Retirement: Regarding the..."6.7 billion" referred to, BOTH chambers passed Senate Bill 141, privatizing and establishing market-oriented conditions for the state retirement system. This would be viewed by anyone except left-leaning writers as a forward thinking, revolutionary way of addressing the huge financial problem Alaska faces. The false premise this system was based on--that the number of retirees wouldn't quickly escalate--now haunts us. Should we let this bleed us to death or simply apply a band-aid? We chose a tourniquet. This was truly an example of the House and Senate working cooperatively to gain control of a looming disaster.

Workers Compensation: According to these same editorialists, the Senate and Governor were victorious in a "hard-won, ugly, but decisive victory...over the House" to pass a flawed bill. This negative observation is false. Once more, they employed an old tactic, that if you repeat false information often enough, many will eventually think it's true. Could the bill have been better? Yes. However, the House and Senate once more cooperated to find a solution, even if imperfect, to out-of-control comp rates.

We were again accused of making complex decisions on retirement and workers comp legislation "behind closed doors." I insist the nameless critics step forward and reveal who their Deep Throat, or source of information is. If there were closed meetings, say a discussion in the Legislative lounge, the hallways, the restrooms, I can assure you no "deals" were cut. Do we discuss major issues wherever we gather? Of course, we're human. We're not a sequestered jury forbidden from discussing the "case" with anyone who will listen. Unnamed writers who hide behind the flag of their paper are far more secretive than we in the Juneau fishbowl.

When the claim was made, "the worker's comp and retirement bills didn't rouse much public passion," again I ask, how was this arrived at?

Where were these clandestine writers when union representatives, school teachers and lobbyists were parading through our Juneau office's every day? I look these people square in the eye, listen to them, read their letters, take their calls and then respond through a very open and *public* action in committee meetings and the House Floor. I have often wondered why some editorialists won't even sign their pieces.

Even when a backhanded compliment is tossed our way, the quibblers get it wrong. They wrote "Money to begin the UAA Integrated Sciences Facility? We'd be better off with the whole allocation, but \$21.6 million is a lot better than last year's zero." Didn't they do their homework? The University asked for \$21.6 million this year and will ask for the remainder when needed later. We gave them *exactly* what they requested. If we had given UAA more than \$21.6 million, I can just imagine the outrage, and rightly so. Will this error be corrected? If I were a betting man, I wouldn't put money on it.

Was this the Legislature's best ever session in terms of fiscal responsibility and reigning in spending? No. But was it the dark, mysterious workings of devious politicians churning out unpalatable sausages as portrayed by the referenced nameless, faceless editorial staff? Absolutely not.

There is one notion critics have brought up I agree with. Editorialists opined "The Legislature failed to save some of the surplus." Yes, we have been rescued again by high oil prices, but cannot as responsible stewards of our resources continue to spend our surpluses. We should instead make our priority downsizing government, encouraging privatization, and creating a favorable business climate. Much work remains, but it should be aided by an unbiased, objective media.

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