

Alaska State Legislature



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Republican Leadership Good For Rural Alaska **Nome Democrat Says Majority Respects, Responds to Bush Needs**

By Rep. Richard Foster

(NOME) - Republican politicians in Alaska have been unfairly accused of somehow working against the interests of rural Alaskans. But as a Democrat who's served with majorities of both parties, I have to say that rural Alaska has done very well under Republicans, and that the Democrats never did any better.

I've been honored to represent Nome and 29 Western Alaska villages in the Alaska House of Representatives; under Democratic majorities from 1989-92, and under Republican majorities ever since. My district is a rural area where capital expenditures on ports, airports, housing, schools, health and sanitation make a big difference in people's lives. On almost every issue important to my district and rural Alaska, the Republicans have understood and provided for our needs:

- **Power Cost Equalization:** The Republican-led Legislature created a \$180 million Power Cost Equalization Endowment with proceeds from sale of the Four Dam Pool hydroelectric facilities. Instead of an annual fight to fund PCE, villages now enjoy a reliable source of funding for this critical service to rural Alaska.
- **Housing:** Decent, affordable housing is a critical need in rural Alaska, and Republicans have been generous in appropriating the millions of dollars in state general funds necessary to bring matching federal funds. This money has built and renovated hundreds of homes in my district and in other rural areas, making a lasting contribution to the quality of life of elders and young families alike.
- **Water and sewer:** While there's been much talk about putting the honey bucket in the museum, the Republicans in Juneau and Washington are doing the heavy lifting to make this promise a reality. Republican state lawmakers have consistently voted to appropriate the 25 percent state match that brings 75 percent federal funds for Village Safe Water programs, bringing my district alone \$150 million since I took office. Now our public health and sanitation in our villages rivals that of Anchorage, and more money is on the way.

(MORE)

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- **Schools:** In my first four years serving under Democratic leadership, my district received one new school, a \$12 million facility in Gambell. But since Republicans took over in 1993, they have invested \$160 million for new schools in my district, including new schools in Chevak, Kotlik, Koyuk, Elim and Golovin. Republican leadership is the best thing to happen to rural education since Molly Hootch.
- **Subsistence:** Even though a minority of Republican senators has stalled its progress, a bill to let Alaskans vote on a rural subsistence priority has already passed the Republican-led House. Those blaming Republicans for an urban-rural split should remember that Democrats also failed to pass a subsistence bill during four regular and two special sessions they controlled from 1989-1992, which I attended. All Alaskans should appreciate the challenge that lawmakers of any party face in crafting a subsistence solution that is as fair to urban Natives -- and non-Natives -- as it is to rural Alaskans.
- **Denali Commission:** U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens, the senior member of Alaska's all-Republican Congressional delegation, helped create the Denali Commission, which brings economic development funds to my district and other parts of Bush Alaska. Primed with millions of cost-sharing state funds voted by Republicans, the Commission has so far directed over \$110 million into rural Alaska in the last three years. A minimum of an additional \$65 million is scheduled for next year. This money not only improves the material well being of village residents, it also creates critical construction and maintenance jobs that let residents earn the cash they need to get through the winter; hone their vocational skills, and expand the economy in village Alaska.

My district is not alone in receiving generous capital funding from Republican legislators. Districts including Nome, Bethel, the Upper Yukon and other rural areas are consistently among those receiving the largest amount of capital funds. The most recent capital budget allocates \$6,743 per voter in rural Alaska (Nome, Kotzebue, Bethel, Interior and Aleutians), compared to \$1,157 per voter in Anchorage and \$1,166 per voter in Fairbanks.

Republicans have been quick to recognize the real needs of Bush Alaskans, and have not hesitated to vote for such funding, year after year. By contrast, Democratic leaders of the House had so neglected Bush Alaska's interests in the early 1980s that various Bush legislators were forced to help replace them with Republicans and others more responsive to rural Alaska's needs. I have long enjoyed working with my friends on both sides of the aisle, but have found I can best serve the needs of my rural constituents by working with a Republican leadership.

I consider myself an Egan Democrat. I believe in encouraging mining and logging and providing jobs for the people, as well as supporting social welfare for those who can't work. But the Democratic Party today seems more concerned with keeping ANWR closed, confiscating guns and saving the whales than with the needs of people living in my area. That's why I am pleased to work with Republicans in the Legislature who are doing an outstanding job of providing for the needs of Alaskans living in my district and in Bush Alaska.

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Rep. Richard Foster (D-Nome) is serving his seventh term in the House of Representatives