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## **House Approves Municipal Consolidation Bill** **Whitaker's HB 296 Would Require Mutual Approval of Mergers**

(JUNEAU) – Municipalities seeking to merge or consolidate with other municipalities would have to win approval of a majority of voters in each community, under a bill passed by the House unanimously today.

House Bill 296, sponsored by Rep. Jim Whitaker (R-Fairbanks), has its roots in conflicts that have arisen as municipalities have attempted to use state laws allowing them to merge with other municipalities without the clearly expressed permission of residents of each area.

“This bill defends a very basic tenant of democracy, the right to self-determination, not of an individual but of a community,” said Rep. Jim Whitaker (R-Fairbanks), who sponsored HB 296. “It’s a community’s right to determine it’s own path. By requiring that a majority of individuals from each community subject to a consolidation or a merger petition, we have preserved that right.”

HB 296 also seeks to ensure that the process of gathering petitions in an effort to effect such consolidation is fair and timely, establishing a one-year window of opportunity in which petitioners can gather signatures.

By guaranteeing that a consolidation petition cannot include signatures gathered over the course of several years, this element of the bill ensures that such petitions reflect the desires of the individuals actually living in the municipality at the time of a final consolidation vote, Whitaker said.

HB 296 moves next to the Senate for consideration.

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