

# Preparing a bright future for Alaskans

*By Sen. Ben Stevens*

When Alaska's 60 lawmakers return to Juneau next month to start the 24th session of the Alaska Legislature we have the opportunity to move our state forward on a host of issues ranging from education funding to natural resource development.

As president-elect of the Alaska Senate I am committed to leading a legislative effort that improves the quality of life for all Alaskans through these issues and many others for the next two years.

At the top of the legislative agenda will be a proposed contract to finance and build a North Slope natural gas pipeline under the states Stranded Gas Act. The Murkowski administration is expected to send lawmakers contract proposals it has crafted with one or more energy companies that will determine how much revenue the state can expect to make from the project.

While my fellow Republican senators and I are as anxious as all Alaskans to get the gas line built, we will cast a critical eye on the contract. Every lawmaker has the responsibility to make sure that not only is the state getting the maximum revenue possible, but that companies without an ownership stake in the pipeline can also use it to transport gas to market and that Alaska has access to the gas for in-state needs.

The gas pipeline is not just about meeting the needs of Alaskans today. It must provide jobs and economic stability for future generations of Alaskans.

The proposed gas line and the possibility of finally opening the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil exploration will send our state into a new era of economic prosperity.

For many years the Legislature and the administration have dealt with dwindling oil revenues and the tough decisions that come with it. Historically high oil prices are giving us a brief reprieve next year.

The latest estimates from the state Office of Management and Budget show there will be a surplus of 653 million dollars for fiscal year 2006. While some people might be inclined to use that mountain of cash to go on a spending spree that increases the annual operating budget, the Senate majority is not. I think all reasonable Alaskans understand as we do that this is a temporary windfall and that fiscal restraint is now more important than ever.

Now is the time for the Legislature to pass an amendment to the state constitution that limits the growth of state spending. This amendment prevents bloated state budgets during good economic times and spares everyone from the painful, but inevitable, budget cuts that must be made during an economic downturn.

Alaska's economy will be based on natural resource development for many decades to come and while we have some control over the pace and scale of that development, we have absolutely no control over what our oil, gas, minerals, timber and other resources sell for on the volatile global commodities market. Passing this constitutional amendment and placing it before voters in 2006 will be one of the major goals for several members of the Senate.

The temporary budget surplus does give lawmakers the chance to catch up on deferred maintenance, invest in education and address capital construction needs.

Last session the Legislature made the largest one-time increase in education funding in state history. School districts across the state are once again faced with the prospect of cutting teachers, slashing programs and increasing class sizes because of shortfalls in the teacher and employee pension programs. My Senate colleagues and I will continue to fund education as much as possible to prevent budget cuts at the local level from impacting the quality of education in both urban and rural classrooms.

The next two years will be turning point for The Last Frontier. I will lead the Senate to the best of my ability to make sure Alaska has a bright future for our children and our children's children.

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- *Sen. Ben Stevens (R-Anchorage) will become Senate president when the legislative session begins Jan. 10.*