

2021 CAPITOL CURRENTS

32nd Alaska State Legislature ~ 1st Session

Fourth Edition

*~ New Speaker but no organization
COVID 19 on Senate minds ~*

HIGHLIGHTS

After 24 days, the House finally selected a permanent Speaker, veteran Republican Rep. Louise Stutes, from Kodiak. The vote was 21-19. Republican Kelly Merrick (Eagle River) voted yes with the D's and I's. All other R's were nays.

Unfortunately, while Merrick voted to break the logjam with a Republican Speaker, she hasn't joined the Stutes coalition. So, the House remains in limbo. Without a majority team, the show can't go on, new leader or not.

The Governor's latest extension of his Disaster Declaration expires today (2/14/21). Efforts to further extend were unsuccessful. The Senate tried to move an amended [SB 56](#) all the way to Senate Finance this week. That version expires in 30 days instead of September 2021, as the Governor proposed.

But the House can't consider it until they organize, and they have adjourned for the weekend. As we understand, this delay could cost the state millions in federal aid.

In the words of one observer: **Now we can hold hands and drive off the cliff together.**

However, Senate did pass [SR 2](#) a Hail Mary that asks the Governor to adopt a new, 30 day, narrowly tailored Disaster Emergency order. In other words, with an expired Declaration and no other timely options, the only functional legislative body basically allowed the Governor to proceed.

President Micciche came down from the podium to make a practical plea for passage as the best thing they can do to keep things going. He noted that the Governor's team is doing excellent work – top of the nation - and there is no good reason to disrupt their efforts.

The House may be of a similar mind. At least 20 House members signed a letter asking the Governor to simply extend the declaration for 30 days. The Administration would prefer a fix but seems to think they can make things work one way or the other. Time will tell.

In the meantime, Senate Judiciary Chair Reinbold held parallel public hearings on the Disaster Declaration. The Senator is passionately opposed to any extension. Judiciary is not a committee of referral but is mostly focusing on legal issues like vaccine liability and constitutionality.

State health officials have announced a shift in vaccine eligibility.

Senior interest in the shot appears to be slowing down which has left hundreds of open February appointments all over the state. Now Alaskans over 50 with one or more high-risk medical conditions are eligible.

Teachers and childcare staff of all ages are also on this list, along with certain front line workers, pandemic response staff and folks living and working in congregate settings like shelters and prisons.

Towns throughout the state are worried about another summer without cruise ship tourists if Canada holds to its 2022 travel ban and our Congressional delegation can't get a waiver so the big ships can travel directly between US ports. Senator Kiehl's [SJR 9](#) hopes to address this concern.

An Anchorage Superior Court judge has ordered the state to pay \$186,000 to the Alaska State Employees Association. The union had challenged an administrative order that stopped collection of union dues from paychecks unless workers opt in, instead of filing a request with the union to opt out.

BUDGET ISSUES

The PFD was a topic last week. [SB 48](#), Governor Dunleavy's proposed supplemental budget of nearly \$1.4 billion, includes \$1.2 billion for additional dividend payments. State Budget Director Neil Steininger said it would complete last year's payment. Senate Finance Chair Bert Stedman called it a "doozy".

The Governor wants a special election this summer on his \$356.4 bond proposal, [SB 74](#). If ratified by the people, he says it will benefit Alaskans by stimulating the statewide economy and stabilizing the construction industry with needed public improvements.

Legislators seem receptive in part due to low interest costs, but they can and will alter the project mix. The biggest rubs are size of the final proposal and regional equity.

Budget Hearings for the week of February 15th

Mon, Feb 15th, 4pm	Senate Public Safety Finance Subcommittee
5:30pm	Senate Commerce, Community & Economic Development Subcommittee
Tues, Feb 16th, 7:30am	Senate LAW Finance Subcommittee
Tues, Feb 16th, 9am, SFIN	Sweep/Reverse Sweep K-12 FY22 Operating & University FY22 Operating-Subcommittee of the Whole-follow-up
Wed, Feb 17th, 9am, SFIN	Alaska Municipal League: Municipal Impacts from State Budget Actions
Wed, Feb 17th, 4pm	Senate Public Safety Finance Subcommittee
5:15pm	Senate Judiciary Finance Subcommittee
5:30pm	Senate Corrections Finance Subcommittee
Thurs, Feb 18th, 1pm	Senate Education & Early Development Finance Subcommittee
5:30pm	Senate Corrections Finance Subcommittee
5:30pm	Senate LAW Finance Subcommittee
Fri, Feb 19th, 7:45am	Senate Health and Social Services Finance Subcommittee
Fri, Feb 19th, 9am, SFIN	Governor's FY22 Budget Amendments

BILLS On the Move

Mon, Feb 15th, 9am, SEDC

[SB 19](#) Extend Special Education Service Agency sponsored by Sen. Stevens would extend the agency through June 30, 2028. *Public testimony will be taken*

[SB 42](#) Virtual and Early Education; Reading sponsored by Sen. Hughes and [SB 8](#) Pre-K; Elem Ed Programs/Funding; Reading sponsored by Sen. Begich will be heard in SEDC in both their Monday and Friday 9am meeting.

Mon, Feb 15th, 9am, SFIN

[SB 56](#) Extending Covid-19 Disaster Emergency sponsored by the Governor.

Tues, Feb 16th, 1:30pm SHSS

[SB 65](#), Liability Consulting Health Care Provider, sponsored by Senator Kiehl, [SB 70](#), Opioid Overdose Drugs, sponsored by Senator Wilson, removes the sunset date on the current statewide standing order for the prescription of naloxone, an opioid overdose reversal drug. Removing the sunset date allows local and regional overdose response programs, first responders, the Department of Public Safety and Corrections, and the public to have the ability to directly distribute and access this lifesaving drug. *Public testimony will be taken*

Tues, Feb 16th, 3:30pm SSTA

[SB 43](#) Elections, Voting, Campaign Finance sponsored by Sen. Hughes

[SB 39](#) Ballot/Custody; Tampering; Voter Registration; Mail sponsored by Sen. Shower

(Also scheduled for Thursday's meeting)

Thurs, Feb 18th, 1:30pm STRA

[SJR 9](#) Urge Exemptions for Cruise Ships sponsored by Sen. Kiehl urges Congress to exempt cruise ships sailing to Alaska from provisions of the Passenger Vessel Services Act and other federal laws that require cruise ships to stop at a Canadian or other foreign port in order to operate in the state for the period during which Canadian ports are closed to cruise ships carrying more than 100 people. If Congress does not exempt the cruise ships, the Legislature urges the President not to fine or take other enforcement actions against cruise ships sailing to the state for the period during which Canadian ports are closed to the cruise ships.

The resolution already has 15 co-sponsors. *Public testimony will be taken*

Fri, Feb 19th, 1:30pm SL&C

[SB 45](#) Age for Nicotine/E-Cig; Tax E-Cig sponsored by Sen. Stevens raises Alaska's legal age for nicotine consumption from 19 to 21, to conform with federal law. It also adds a vapor product, component, or solution used in electronic cigarettes as subject to the excise tax on tobacco products. This change would only apply to solutions containing nicotine. Currently, these products do not fall under the definition of tobacco products and are not subject to tax at the state level. The bill would take effect January 1, 2022.

GOVERNOR'S CORNER

The Governor announced Friday that he accepted the resignation of Public Safety Commissioner, Amanda Price. Kelly Howell, long time DPS employee who previously served as the Department's legislative liaison and director of administrative services, will serve as temporary Commissioner until a successor to Price is appointed.

ITEMS OF INTEREST

SJUD will hear from David Barton with Historian Wall Builders discussing the “History of Pandemics” on **Wednesday at 1:30pm**. On **Friday at 1:30pm**, they will discuss concerns with the Government’s COVID Response, “The Stand” from Simone Gold, and a University of Alaska Anchorage COVID Projection Model

SFIN will consider **Executive Order 119-DHSS Reorganization** on **Thursday, Feb 18th 9am**

SEDC will hear from Tom Kelly with the Education Commission of the States discussing the “National Landscape and Policy Trends in Early Literacy”

Confirmation Hearings

Monday, Feb 15th 1:30pm **SJUD** will consider William Craig for the Alaska State Commission for Human Rights

Wednesday, Feb 17th 9am **SEDC** will consider Lorri van Diest, Keith Hamilton, Sally Stockhausen, and Jeffry Erickson for the Board of Education and Early Development

WAYS TO FOLLOW HEARINGS

Check Calendar Daily – Bills Can Be Rescheduled at Sponsor’s/Chair Request

Website: Daily Committee Hearings for February 8-12, 2021 [Weekly Schedule](#)

Gavel to Gavel: Most committee hearings can be seen and heard on Gavel Alaska. It is broadcast on both local access TV and on the Internet at [Gavel Alaska Schedule - KTOO](#)

Streaming Video [alaskalegislaturetv](#)

Contacting your Legislator/Testifying - The Capitol building is closed to the public during the pandemic. There are no plans for in-person visits or testimony.

Contact your local Legislative Information Office (LIO) to learn how to participate in legislative hearings: [LIO Offices](#)

You also can call using the following numbers.

Tell operator which hearing and bill number you are calling to testify on.

Here’s the LIO call-in information for testimony:

If calling from a Juneau phone number: 586-9085

If calling from an Anchorage phone number: 563-9085

If calling from any other number: 844-586-9085

Click here for legislators’ email addresses: [Legislator Email Address List \(xls\)](#)

Click here for legislative staff contacts: [Staff List](#)

~ End of Report ~

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