



## City drops mask mandate, eases distancing rules for fully vaccinated travelers

By CALEB VIERKANT  
*Sentinel writer*

Wrangell's mask mandate was rescinded at Tuesday's borough assembly meeting, while testing rules for travelers were reaffirmed with some minor changes.

Both the mask mandate and traveler rules were adopted by the assembly at the beginning of March, in response to a significant spike of COVID-19 cases in Petersburg as well as several cases in town.

However, Wrangell's Emergency Operations Center recommended the city repeal the mask mandate as cases have declined, lessening the risk of an outbreak in the community.

The mask mandate required that almost everyone in Wrangell, with some exceptions, wear a face mask or other face covering when in public settings. Violators risked a \$25 fine. The assembly unanimously voted to end the mask mandate with no discussion of the ordinance at its Tuesday meeting.

The Emergency Operations Center also recommended that, while the mask mandate could go away, the assembly reaffirm ordinances requiring interstate and intrastate travelers visiting Wrangell get tested before arriving in town or at the airport upon arrival.

However, the ordinance amended city rules for travelers to make clear "those

who are fully vaccinated do not need to practice strict social distancing while awaiting test results."

Airport testing is currently scheduled to remain available through the end of June, according to the assembly ordinance.

The testing requirements are some of the easiest and least interfering ways the city can determine if COVID-19 is coming into the community, Borough Manager Lisa Von Barga said. As such, the EOC recommended they stay in place at this time.

There is no penalty in the ordinance for failing to comply with the testing rules.

The travel ordinances brought before the assembly were similar to the ones approved at the beginning of the month, but with some changes, Von Barga pointed out.

"We wanted to update the ordinances before you previously, specifically to put new CDC [Centers for Disease Control] guidance in there that allows for fully vaccinated individuals to still test when they come into the community, but not have to quarantine while they are waiting for their test results," she said. "There were a couple of other minor changes made to the ordinances as well."

One of the other minor changes, Von Barga said, included fully replacing the ordinance's reference to international travelers and instead referencing federal CDC guidelines.

Both the interstate travel ordinance and the intrastate ordinance are scheduled to expire April 13. The ordinances were approved unanimously by the assembly.

As of Monday, there are two active cases in Wrangell. The community has counted a total of 36 cases since the start

## Federal aid, rising oil price ease Alaska's budget crunch

By LARRY PERSILY  
*Sentinel writer*

Legislators started the session in January amid a shortage of revenues and debate whether the state could even afford a dividend this fall unless it exceeded its annual limited draw from the Permanent Fund. Significantly higher oil prices and more than \$1 billion from this month's federal pandemic aid package may fix both problems, though only temporarily.

The Alaska Department of Revenue told legislators last week that higher oil prices could produce an additional \$790 million in revenues this year and next fiscal year, close to a 10% boost in total state general fund revenues.

At the same time, lawmakers have learned that Alaska's share of the American Rescue Plan Act, signed by President Joe Biden two weeks ago, could send about \$1.2 billion to the state, plus \$200 million more for housing aid for renters and homeowners, almost \$360 million for education and about \$240 million directly to local communities.

Continued on page 12

## More students expected back, but budget cuts still possible

By CALEB VIERKANT  
*Sentinel writer*

Though the Wrangell School District now projects 259 students to enroll for the fall semester based on the belief that more families will send their children back to the classroom, enrollment would still be down 13% from pre-pandemic numbers and the latest draft budget shows a loss of five teaching positions from this year.

School board members reviewed the latest draft budget at their March 18 meeting, with more work to come before adopting a spending plan for next school year.

State funding for school operations is based on enrollment, which had been around 300 students before many families put their children into homeschooling or other programs during the COVID-19 pandemic, significantly cutting into Wrangell's student count.

Some budget help is on the way



PHOTO BY CALEB VIERKANT/ WRANGELL SENTINEL

## Honoring Vietnam veterans

Tom Rooney Jr. (front) and Joel Churchill (back) drum at the Johnson O'-Malley dance group practice last Friday, preparing for their performance at a Vietnam Veterans Day welcome home online event Monday. The Wrangell Native dance group is among more than 20 groups scheduled to participate in the event. See story on Page 6

of the pandemic about a year ago, but all have recovered so far. The most recent case was a staff member of Wrangell's secondary schools, reported on Monday

and prompting the middle school and high school to move to distance learning. The elementary school has continued normal operations.

from the federal government. Wrangell will receive a share of the almost \$360 million allocated to Alaska education in the American Rescue Plan Act signed by the president two weeks ago. State Education Department officials said Tuesday they are waiting on more information from the federal government before setting funding levels to individual districts.

The Wrangell district has received about \$370,000 in two previous federal pandemic relief programs.

The district's operating costs for next year totals about \$5.164 million in the latest draft.

School Board Members David Wilson and Patty Gilbert both asked at the March 18 meeting that the board hold more budget workshops to determine spending priorities.

"There's just too many variables right now," Wilson said. "There's too much unknown and I really want to

know more. There's so much cutting. Cutting five teachers, that's definitely going to affect what we're doing, as well as other things. I think we need more information, and try to gather up more, and maybe have a work session on prioritizing. It's clear that we need to do something."

The draft budget presented to the board was the second from the administration. The first was based on an even lower student count, just 200 students, cutting even deeper into state funding.

Superintendent Debbe Lancaster said the first draft was as lean as the administration could make it. It involved cuts to salaries and benefits, reductions in hours for teachers and support staff, and the loss of a custodian, she said. The second draft shows fewer cuts, but she cautioned the board to remember it is still just a projection of the district's financial

Continued on page 2

# School budget

Continued from page 1

situation at this time. "It's a projection based on a little bit more knowledge we have," Lancaster said. "Just to give you an idea of where we're going with the budget thinking."

School Board Member Cyni Crary asked how Lancaster came to the projection of 259 students for next year. The superintendent said school administrators have been in regular contact with families to talk about their comfort levels for returning their children to the classrooms. There has been some reluctance, as far as safety and the district's face mask requirement, but she said

they have heard from several families that their children would come back.

"I believe that I heard one of the administrators said they have confirmed as much as you can possibly confirm in March, looking at August, that 36 students would be returning," Lancaster said. "There were a significant number of the secondary kids that were going to be returning."

She added, "I am totally assuming that the kids are going to come back. ... If they don't, for whatever reason, then you've got a year to figure out, with your new superintendent and great technology skills, you've got a year to work with

the staff and figure out a great distance-learning [program] or think of ways to increase the revenue."

Lancaster will leave the job June 30. Bill Burr, from the Delta/Greely School District in Interior Alaska will take over

as Wrangell superintendent. "Create a home school program. There are solutions on the horizon," Lancaster said.

## Wrangell Roundup: Special Events

**LITTLE LEAGUE** registration forms can be picked up and returned to Nic's Place or to your child's school office. Open to children ages 4 to 14. The fee is \$30 for one player, or \$50 covers the family. And reach out if you would like to volunteer or have any questions, comments or concerns to League President Briana Schilling, brianna2013@hotmail.com, 874-2855 or 305-0282.

**NOLAN CENTER THEATER** presents "Raya and the Last Dragon," rated PG, at 7 p.m. Saturday and 4 p.m. Sunday. Tickets are \$7 for adults and \$5 for children under age 12 to the animation, action and adventure film. The concessions table will be open. Masks are required (and provided) as you enter the building. You may remove your mask while eating. Wash your hands or use the hand sanitizer provided when entering, and adhere to the six-foot distancing designated in the lobby as well as theater seating. Children under 12 must be accompanied by an adult.

**AARP TAX AIDE PROGRAM** is providing free help with individual tax returns. The volunteers are providing assistance on Saturdays at the Nolan Center, through April 10. Due to the pandemic, they will be taking appointments only. Call Paula Rak at 874-3824 to set up your appointment.

**PERMANENT FUND DIVIDEND DEADLINE** is 11:59 p.m. March 31 for online applications. Paper applications must be postmarked by March 31. The Wrangell Legislative Information Office can assist with PFD issues and help people file online, or paper application forms are available outside the door of the office. The office can copy and certify documents for applicants who do not want to mail in their original documents. The legislative office in the Kadin Building on Front Street is open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays. Call 874-3013 with questions.

**WRANGELL PARKS AND RECREATION** is offering an open-gym opportunity for middle school boys to get in some court time, 3:30 to 4:30 p.m. Mondays and Wednesdays through March 31 at the community center gym. Space is limited, and participants must register. Check online at [www.wrangellrec.com](http://www.wrangellrec.com) or call 874-2444.

## Continuing Events

**PARKS and RECREATION** [www.wrangellrec.com](http://www.wrangellrec.com)

### POOL ACTIVITIES:

- Arthritis class, 8:30 - 9:30 a.m., Monday, Wednesday, Friday
- Lap swim, 6 - 7:30 a.m. Monday, Wednesday, Friday
- Lap/tot swim, 11:30 a.m. - 1 p.m., weekdays, 5:15 - 6:15 p.m. Tuesday, Thursday, and 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Saturday
- Open swim, 5:30 - 7 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday; 6:30 - 8 p.m. Friday; 1 - 2 p.m. Saturday
- Swim Club, 3:15 - 5:15 p.m., weekdays
- Water aerobics class, 10 - 11 a.m. Monday, Wednesday, Friday

### WEIGHT ROOM:

6 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. and 3:30 - 7:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 6 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. and 3:30 - 8:30 p.m. Friday; 10 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. Saturday

**AA Meetings:** North Star Group meets from 7 to 8 p.m. Tuesdays and Fridays at St. Philips Episcopal Church.

*Want more attendance at your meeting or event? Send information for Roundup to [wrgsent@gmail.com](mailto:wrgsent@gmail.com) or call 874-2301. Or go to the Sentinel website, click on the Calendar tab, and submit your entry online.*

## The Way We Were In the Sentinel 100, 75, 50 and 25 years ago.

### March 24, 1921

The pupils of the public school were given a delightful surprise last Friday afternoon, when before being dismissed for the day they were told to go to the gymnasium. Arriving there, they were served with ice-cream and cake by ladies of the Parent-Teachers Association. In order to facilitate the work for those in charge of the party, the pupils, accompanied by their teachers, left the school in relays. Members of the school board also were invited to be present at the time. The party given Friday takes the place of the one given at the close of the school year last year by the Parents-Teachers Association. The refreshments were donated by the patrons of the school and the secret was so well kept that the pupils enjoyed a genuine surprise. The social committee of the P.T.A., Mrs. I.C. Borge, Mrs. Charles Benjamin and Mrs. C.B. Hiltz, had charge of the affair.

### March 22, 1946

An additional \$293.50 has been obtained for Wrangell's seaplane float to be constructed soon. The Territorial Road Board granted the additional amount when F. G. Hanford, mayor of Wrangell now in Juneau as representative of the First Division in the Territorial Legislature, appeared before

them at a board meeting and requested additional funds. The original amount furnished by the territory was \$960. Word from Hanford reports that with passage of the National Airport Bill in Congress, which allows 75 percent government funds for the construction of airports, he has arranged a conference with Walter P. Flett, regional administrator for the funds, who will be in Juneau shortly. He will present Wrangell's need for an airport before Flett.

### March 25, 1971

The city is contemplating a house-to-house survey to sniff out each and every member of Wrangell's dog population. It's all part of the crackdown on the four-footed set, who have had it much their own way in recent years, ignoring both leash and license laws. The City Council on Tuesday approved an emergency ordinance imposing stiffer dog license fees and stiffer penalties for owners who ignore them — or the leash law. City Manager Kestor Dotts said the survey is a possibility because purchase of dog licenses don't seem to be commensurate with the number of dogs supposed to be in resilience hereabouts.

### March 28, 1996

Wrangellites have been craning their necks the past few

clear nights to catch a glimpse of the comet Hyakutake passing overhead. Named after the Japanese amateur astronomer who discovered it in January, the comet is the first one easily visible in Alaska since the mid-1970s. With an orbit bringing it closer to Earth than nearly any other comet this century, it will be in our skies through the early days of April. Although the cosmic traveler is moving, night by night, it can be seen by locating the Big Dipper and following the handle out until you see a "smudge." Catch it soon. The next show will be at least 10,000 years from now.

## Birthdays & Anniversaries

*The Sentinel extends its best wishes to the following people listed on the Wrangell Chamber of Commerce Community Scholarship Birthday Calendar.*

**Thursday, March 25:** Thorin Booker, Ernie Campbell, Charlie Kathleen Nelson, McKenzie Smalley, Kristie Kohrt Weber, Taylor Rose Young.

**Friday, March 26:** Stuart Woodbury; Anniversary: Tony and Kerry Byford.

**Saturday, March 27:** Winston B. Davies, Abby Haggard.

**Sunday, March 28:** Trevor Guggenbickler.

**Monday, March 29:** Beverly Angerman, Paige Noelle Baremore, Tamara Eastaugh, Larry Taylor Jr.

**Tuesday, March 30:** Christian Kohrt Weber, Alan Westerlund, Bob Wickman, Kelyn Young.

**Wednesday, March 31:** Andrew Edgley, Janell Privett.

**Thursday, April 1:** Donald Covalt, Elissa DeBoer, Erin Hammock, Adrianna Mae Stough; Anniversary: Dave and Arlene Wilson.

*If you would like to add a birthday or anniversary, call the Sentinel at 874-2301. There is no charge.*

## Senior Center Meals Menu Delivery Only

### Friday, March 26

Spaghetti with meat sauce, vegetables, romaine salad

### Monday, March 29

Closed for Seward's Day

### Tuesday, March 30

Beef stew, fruit salad, bread

### Wednesday, March 31

Egg salad sandwich, minestrone soup, cottage cheese

### Thursday, April 1

Chicken chop suey, Chinese vegetables, steamed rice

**Please call Wrangell Senior Center at 874-2066 by 10 a.m. for delivery.**

**Senior van also available to transport seniors to medical appointments reasonable errands like collecting mail, getting prescriptions at pharmacies or other essential need items.**

## Ferry Schedule

### Northbound

**Sunday, March 28**

Matanuska, 1:45 p.m.

**Sunday, April 4**

Matanuska, 2:45 p.m.

**Sunday, April 11**

Matanuska, 2:15 p.m.

**Sunday, April 18**

Matanuska, 1:15 p.m.

### Southbound

**Wednesday, March 31**

Matanuska, 7:45 a.m.

**Wednesday, April 7**

Matanuska, 5:30 a.m.

**Wednesday, April 14**

Matanuska, 7:15 a.m.

**Wednesday, April 21**

Matanuska, 3:15am

*Call 874-2021 for information or call 874-3711 or Toll Free 800-642-0066 for recorded information.*



## TIDES March 25 - March 31

### High Tides

### Low Tides

	AM		PM		AM		PM	
	Time	Ft	Time	Ft	Time	Ft	Time	Ft
March 25	11:20	15.1	...	...	05:09	4.5	05:44	0.1
March 26	00:13	14.9	12:08	16.4	05:58	2.7	06:24	-1.0
March 27	00:49	16.3	12:53	17.4	06:39	0.9	07:01	-1.6
March 28	01:23	17.5	01:35	18.0	07:19	-0.7	07:37	-1.8
March 29	01:58	18.4	02:18	18.1	07:59	-0.7	08:13	-1.5
March 30	02:33	18.9	03:01	17.7	08:40	-2.7	08:50	-0.7
March 31	03:09	19.0	03:46	16.7	09:23	-2.8	09:30	0.5



## Daylight Hours

Date	Sunrise	Sunset	Hours
March 25	6:36a	7:14p	12:37h
March 26	6:34a	7:16p	12:42h
March 27	6:31a	7:19p	12:47h
March 28	6:28a	7:21p	12:52h
March 29	6:26a	7:23p	12:56h
March 30	6:26a	7:25p	13:01h
March 31	6:20a	7:27p	13:06h

# COVID case moves middle, high schools to remote learning

By LARRY PERSILY  
*Sentinel writer*

Students at Stikine Middle School and Wrangell High School will attend class remotely at least through Friday after a staff member at the secondary schools tested positive for COVID-19 on Monday.

Remote learning started the next day, as both schools closed. The shutdown has not affected classes at Evergreen Elementary School, the school district reported Monday.

"This individual ... is asymptomatic and is now in isolation," the city announced Monday afternoon. It was Wrangell's sec-

ond reported COVID in the past week.

"All students who have been in close contact with the person who tested positive will be contacted directly by our school district staff," Schools Superintendent Debbe Lancaster said in a letter to the community on Monday. "Any student who is considered a close contact will need to remain at home for a 14-day quarantine period. We will be working with those students to implement/continue remote learning."

A public health official will call close contacts of the infected

**Continued on page 4**

# New schools superintendent landed in Alaska after a job fair

By CALEB VIERKANT  
*Sentinel writer*

Though moving to Alaska in 1997 was an unexpected turn in Bill Burr's life when he began his career in education, it has grown on him, he said, and he is thrilled to continue his career in the state.

Burr will move to Wrangell July 1 to serve as schools superintendent. He was born in Iowa, but has worked as a teacher and administrator across Alaska.

He studied at the University of Northern Iowa, where he said his minor claim to fame was living in the same dorm as future NFL Hall of Fame quarterback Kurt Warner.

His first full-time teaching job was in Mountain Village, in the Lower Yukon School District.

"They were a last-minute addition to my university's job fair," Burr said. "Though I don't like the cold, I thought why not? I'll talk to them. Alaska was still that mythical place. The pay was a lot higher than the traditional Iowa pay. I thought if nothing else I'm gonna pay off some student loans and have an adventure."

After four years with Mountain Village, Burr moved to the Aleutians East Borough School District as tech director. After six years there, he became superintendent of the Delta/Greely School District in 2014.

The district straddles the Alaska and Richardson highways southeast of Fairbanks, and encompasses Fort Greely, Delta Junction and smaller towns. The district has over 800 students, more than twice the enrollment of Wrangell schools.

His move here, adding Southeast to his Alaska list. "North Slope's the only one I'm lacking," Burr said.

Aside from a change of scenery, Burr said he is excited to come to Wrangell for a variety of reasons. For one, he said Wrangell and the Delta/Greely districts have a lot in common. They are both high-achieving school districts, he said, so he believes he can bring a lot to the job as superintendent.

Wrangell has low turnover and high test scores, among other attributes. He said that he wants to learn how the district has accomplished this and combine it with his own knowledge, and use that to push the schools even further.

While he plans to spend the early days of his new job listening and learning, Burr said improving the district's use of technology will be one of his priorities. Another area he said will



"The early days of my job are going to be mostly listening about where we stand, and researching and evaluating that information to move forward."

- Bill Burr

*Wrangell's next schools superintendent*

need focus is budgeting. He will have a lot to learn about the district's budget, the borough's contribution to it, and other factors that could affect the district.

"The early days of my job are going to be mostly listening about where we stand, and researching and evaluating that information to move forward," he said.

Burr said he intends to visit Wrangell in April or May, and finish his move to town by mid-June. He hopes to work with the current superintendent, Debbe Lancaster, and familiarize himself with Wrangell before beginning his job. He will take over for Lancaster after her contract expires June 30.

# GCI will move call-center operations overseas

*Sentinel staff*

GCI, the largest telecommunications provider in the state, is planning to move all of its call-center operations out of Alaska and will contract with a third-party vendor to provide the service from the Philippines.

The move will start this summer, according to a report in the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner on Saturday.

The company, which provides cable television, internet, cell and wired telephone services in Alaska, has had a hard time filling its call-center jobs, said Heather Handyside, vice president for corporate communications at GCI.

Currently, GCI's operation in Anchorage is set to run with 142 employees to handle customer service calls, but the company has routinely been unable to fill up to 30% of the positions, Handyside told the News-Miner. The vacancies hurt customer service, she said.

"For our consumer customer service calls, right now they go to employees in Alaska, and some of the customers need to be on hold for up to 90 minutes," she said. "We hope the transition will help us decrease the call wait times and expand the call-line service to 24/7."

GCI has tried to hire more employees, including offering a sign-up bonus, Handyside said, but it has been challenging to fill the jobs and keep them filled.

The company plans to offer jobs elsewhere in

its Alaska operations, such as at retail stores, to 84 of its call-center employees.

GCI has more than 200,000 consumer accounts in Alaska, separate from business or government accounts, and many of those consumer accounts cover multiple services such as cell phones and the internet.

The company started in Alaska in 1979. Its sale to Liberty Broadband of Colorado was completed last year.

Tata Consultancy Services, an India-based multinational technology company, will run the call center in the Philippines.

Outsourcing call-center work to overseas providers is an increasingly common practice, particularly for banks and communications companies.

Heather Hudson, former director of the Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of Alaska Anchorage, said she believes the move will save GCI money.

"It's not surprising given that a lot of companies are doing that, and given the current ownership of GCI (outside Alaska)," she told the Anchorage Daily News on Monday.

Customers calling GCI will start to see the transition in August, Handyside told the Daily News. The switch will be completed in November, allowing workers in the Philippines training time on GCI customer issues and needs, she said.

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# FROM THE PUBLISHER

## The right decisions do not come easily

By LARRY PERSILY  
Publisher

Separate decisions affecting an effort to recall Wrangell's mayor and the Juneau-Douglas High School boys basketball team are similar, in that they disappointed some people, but they are not equal.

The organizers of a recall effort against Mayor Stephen Prysunka made the wise decision not to fight over the legality of their recall petition, and instead to focus on the assembly seats at stake in the next municipal election.

Rather than burn up time and money in litigation over the city's decision to reject the recall petition, the group decided "the most expedient way" of making its point and pursuing its agenda would be to find people to run for the three assembly seats that will be on the October ballot.

Let the voters decide the future of the city on a broad range of issues rather than a single-subject recall special election.

Though no doubt some of the recall group organizers may be disappointed, they made the right choice not to fight the battle in court no matter how much they might have wanted the chance.

As for the Juneau-Douglas High School boys basketball team, they, too, will stay off the court, but the disappointed players lost to a virus and public health concerns, not the game of divisive politics.

The team won the Southeast high school tournament on Saturday against Ketchikan, but the next day the school district announced the team would not travel to the state Division 4A championship in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough this weekend. The COVID-19 case count in the borough is too high, putting the games in Palmer and Wasilla off-limits for Juneau-Douglas School Dis-

trict travel.

The Mat-Su Borough last week had the highest number of COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people in the state, according to the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. The positive-test rate in the Mat-Su was three times higher than in Anchorage, and the borough's population was the least vaccinated in the state. Not exactly worthy of the honor roll, and certainly a worry for anyone traveling into the borough.

It's ironic that the Alaska School Activities Association (ASAA) moved the state tournament to the Mat-Su this year because pandemic-control rules in Anchorage prohibited the event. However, the high infection count was too real for Juneau school officials to overlook.

"ASAA selecting the Mat-Su Borough as the location for the state tournament essentially ended our season and dreams of competing for a state championship," Juneau-Douglas Coach Robert Casperson told Anchorage TV station KTUU.

Sometimes, the hardest decisions are the most disappointing. The Juneau-Douglas basketball team may not win a shot at the state tournament next year. Certainly, seniors lost their last opportunity at a state title this year.

I feel for the high school players who got caught up in the pandemic. They played well on the court but the school district played by its rules and took the team off the court. There is no happy ending to this one, just another sadness as the pandemic continues to mess with people's lives.

It's another reason for people to get vaccinated so that no more school teams lose an opportunity they earned. Support students by getting a shot in the arm.

## School closure

Continued from page 3

person as part of contact tracing. "Please answer that call and cooperate with public health officials to help protect others," the superintendent said.

"If contact tracing investigations determine that more students or staff may have been exposed, those contacts will be notified promptly. The school community will be contacted if any further action is needed," Lancaster said. "We continue to encourage all parents take their student's temperature and monitor students closely for any sign of potential illness."

Spring break for Wrangell schools is scheduled for Thursday and Friday, April 1-2.

Until classes resume in person, the district advised that middle and high school students "should log into their online classes at the scheduled times. If they have technical issues or difficulties, contact Katelyn Reeves at the middle school at 874-3393."

In February, all three Wrangell schools switched to remote learning for just over a week after someone associated with the middle and high schools tested positive.

Of the 36 COVID-19 cases Wrangell has seen since the start of the pandemic, 25 have been locals, eight non-locals, two residents who were not in town at the time — and one residency unknown.

The 25 cases among Wrangell residents represent about 1% of the community's population. Statewide, almost 59,000 resident cases have been reported since the pandemic started a year ago, according to the state website Monday, about 8% of Alaska's population.

The city continues to advise that people "keep close interactions to a very small group of people, ideally just within your household," and staying six-feet away "from others outside your household at all times."

In addition, the city reminds people to mask up in public places, stay home if feeling sick, get tested for COVID-19 even with only one symptom or mild symptoms, and call the SEARHC COVID-19 hotline at 907-966-8799 or other health care provider.

The school district statement added, "Students should remain at home if they have any symptoms of COVID-19 including

fever (defined as temperature over 100.4 degrees), new or persistent cough, new trouble breathing or shortness of breath, chills, night sweats, sore throat, body aches, muscle aches, joint pain, headache, loss of taste or smell, fatigue, and/or stomach issues (diarrhea, vomiting, abdominal pain)."

# EDITORIAL

## Office closure plan is no bargain

The governor will go to great lengths to avoid supporting a tax — any tax — but taxes are how people pay for public services.

Instead of thinking about the public, his administration's latest ill-conceived plan is to close Division of Motor Vehicle offices in six small communities so that he can claim budget savings of \$500,000 a year.

Of course, what the state may save, the public would have to pay — and more.

The administration has proposed contracting with private operators to provide driver's license and vehicle registration services in Haines, Homer, Eagle River, Tok, Delta Junction and Valdez. Those private companies would charge the same license and registration fees as the state, plus a mark-up for their expenses and profit.

Legislators, wisely, are pushing back against this bad idea.

Residents in Haines who don't want to pay the extra fee could take a state ferry to Juneau and visit the motor vehicles office there. Residents in Valdez could drive six hours to Anchorage. Residents in Tok could drive four hours to Fairbanks.

You get the idea. Residents in those communities would have no option other than paying the higher fees for any services they cannot obtain online at the state website.

This is all because the anti-tax governor believes privatizing public services counts as cutting the budget. He is wrong. While it does cut state spending, it sets up private businesses to profit from providing public services and often costs the public more as a result.

A better idea is for the governor and Legislature to decide which services are needed, look at the state checkbook, and tax everyone fairly so that all can share in the responsibility to provide — and benefit from — public services.

A good example is a bill waiting for a hearing before the House Finance Committee. Alaska's motor fuel tax is the lowest in the nation, at 8 cents a gallon. It's less than one-third the average of the other 49 states and hasn't budged from 8 cents in 51 years.

It's time to raise the tax to pay for improved road maintenance.

But the governor is non-committal on the tax. It's time he understood that taxes are not bad; the problem is bad decisions: Such as telling small-town Alaskans to pay more for the same services that other Alaskans receive.

Closing the offices and contracting out the work is a bad idea, especially when it's done under the pretense of a state budget cut that produces a profit for someone else.

— The Wrangell Sentinel

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Group wants to include homeschooled graduates

The Wrangell High School class of 2021 will soon be graduating, with traditional festivities reduced again by the coronavirus pandemic. Wrangell has a long history of celebrating female graduates and the women who have mothered them. Beta Sigma Phi inherited the tradition from the Wrangell Civic Club years ago and plans to continue it this spring.

We are planning a COVID-safe mother-daughter recognition for April to celebrate our high school seniors. We also want to include homeschool students who have finished or are finishing their high school studies this past year and need your help to identify them. Contact any Beta Sigma Phi member or me directly at rooney@aptalaska.net.

Alice Rooney  
for Beta Sigma Phi

### Recall group looks instead to October municipal election

Much research has been completed in the endeavor to recall Mayor Stephen Prysunka. City ordinances have been checked, actions at meetings have been reviewed, and the state Superior Court has been contacted. We as a group feel that our actions are justified even although the city attorney is not in agreement (and rejected our recall petition last month).

The court system is backed up due to the effects of the pandemic, which would leave us sometime into 2022 to have a hearing. This is not what we would consider reasonable to pursue a recall in the courts.

There is of course another avenue of action to take. October of this year will see three openings on the borough assembly: two three-year terms and a one-year term.

Don McConachie Sr.

Oldest continuously published paper in Alaska



ESTABLISHED NOVEMBER 20, 1902  
Published Weekly By: Good Journalism LLC  
PO Box 798, Wrangell, AK 99929  
Phone: 907-874-2301, Fax 907-874-2303

POSTMASTER: send address changes to Wrangell Sentinel, P.O. Box 798, Wrangell, AK 99929

### Sentinel Staff:

Publisher ..... Larry Persily  
News Editor..... Caleb Vierkant  
Front Office .....Amber Armstrong  
Production .....Ola Richards

The Wrangell Sentinel (USPS - 626480) is published every Thursday. Periodicals mail postage paid at Wrangell, Alaska 99929. Offices at 205 Front St., Wrangell, Alaska 99929; phone 907-874-2301; Fax 907-874-2303; email wrgsent@gmail.com; website: www.wrangellsentinel.com

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Single Copy .....\$1.50  
Local.....\$46  
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# Group drops recall effort against mayor

By CALEB VIERKANT  
Sentinel writer

Efforts to recall Mayor Steve Prysunka have ended, according to a statement from recall spokesperson Don McConachie. Instead, he and others in the group will focus on October's municipal election when three borough assembly seats will be on the ballot.

Recall efforts against the mayor began around the beginning of the year. According to the advocates, Prysunka lead the assembly to violate local and state laws with the passage of a community mask mandate during a quickly called Nov. 12 meeting.

The city first rejected the recall petition as premature; recall efforts can only begin after the first 120 days of an elected official's term. Prysunka took office late last fall.

The group refiled in early February. The city rejected the petition on the grounds that the group's allegations did not



Mayor Steve Prysunka

"rise to the level of 'misconduct or incompetence'" as required by law, adding that "the allegations contained in the application do not include any statements that Mayor Prysunka has demonstrated lack of ability, legal qualifications, or fitness to discharge his required duties."

The recall group had 30 days to appeal the decision in state court. However, McConachie wrote last week that they decided not to pursue a legal fight. The court system is backed up due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, he wrote, and they would not get a hearing on the matter until sometime next year.

While they will not pursue further attempts to recall the mayor, he said they still believe they are in the right.

"Much research has been completed in the endeavor to



PHOTO BY CALEB VIERKANT/ WRANGELL SENTINEL

## How old is that television?

Young or old, the Wrangell Cooperative Association's e-waste recycling event accepted all ages of electronics, even this old picture-tube television. Ashtyn Hayes (left) and Kim Wickman (right) were among the workers who helped run the event at the WCA carving shed on Front Street last Saturday. In addition to televisions, old computers and monitors, the e-waste event also collected household batteries. The event loaded 15 pallets with electronics to ship out of state for proper disposal.

recall," McConachie wrote. "City ordinances have been checked, actions at meetings have been reviewed, and ... we as a group feel that our actions are justified."

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# Latest cruise ship schedule shows 48 stops this summer

*Sentinel staff report*

As of last week, Wrangell was hoping for 48 cruise ship stops from May 28 to Sept. 20, about half the number expected last year before the pandemic shut down all cruise ships from coming to Alaska.

The 48 port calls on the draft calendar "is still incomplete as we wait to hear from some of the smaller vessels that stop in Wrangell," according to the chamber of commerce website.

While the few larger vessels on the draft calendar will operate only if Canada opens its borders to cruise ship traffic or the U.S. government can maneuver a way around the problem, most of the stops are scheduled by smaller ships that will operate entirely in Alaska waters during the summer.

Those ships, mostly operated by Alaska Dream Cruises and UnCruise Adventures, generally can carry 40 to 80 passengers each.

"Most of the larger ships ... have canceled their 2021 season due to sailing restrictions imposed by Canada," the chamber website said. The largest ships, with capacity for 3,000 or 4,000 passengers each, do not call on Wrangell, but their loss is a serious blow to cruise-dependent towns like Skagway, Ketchikan and Juneau.

Wrangell had expected 17,000 cruise ship travelers last summer, before the season shut down without ever starting.

Statewide, Alaska anticipated 1.4 million visitors on cruise ships last year, up slightly from the year before.

In addition to waiting on a decision whether Canada will open its borders, the cruise industry also is waiting for operating rules from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention before the ship owners — and port communities — can make definitive plans for what they need to do to protect passengers, crew and local residents.

UnCruise has announced that it will require all passengers and crew this year to be vaccinated against COVID-19. The decision is a reversal from the company's policy a month ago to keep passengers on board the vessels and away from visiting communities.

"It brings back a measure — far from all — but it brings back a measure of normalcy," CEO Dan Blanchard told Juneau public radio station KTOO this week.

"Our choice is, we have to be as safe as possible. And that means that if you're 18 or older, you need to be vaccinated," he said.

UnCruise tried one sailing in Southeast Alaska last year, but turned back to port when a passenger tested positive for the coronavirus.

The company this year plans to bring 4,300 people to Alaska, the radio report said.

Looking longer term, the Wrangell Convention and Visitor Bureau continues to work on redesigning its website, plan new social media promotions and launch a branding campaign.

Work on redesigning the website has been ongoing for some time, Wrangell Economic Development Director Carol Rushmore said at the group's March 18 meeting. The new website could potentially go live by the end of May, she said.

The redesign is being done by SPAWN Ideas, an advertising agency out of Anchorage. Rushmore said the cost is about \$15,000.

The convention and visitor bureau decided March 18 that it would wait for the work on the website to finish before pushing a new branding campaign to promote visitors to town, targeting tourists for 2022.

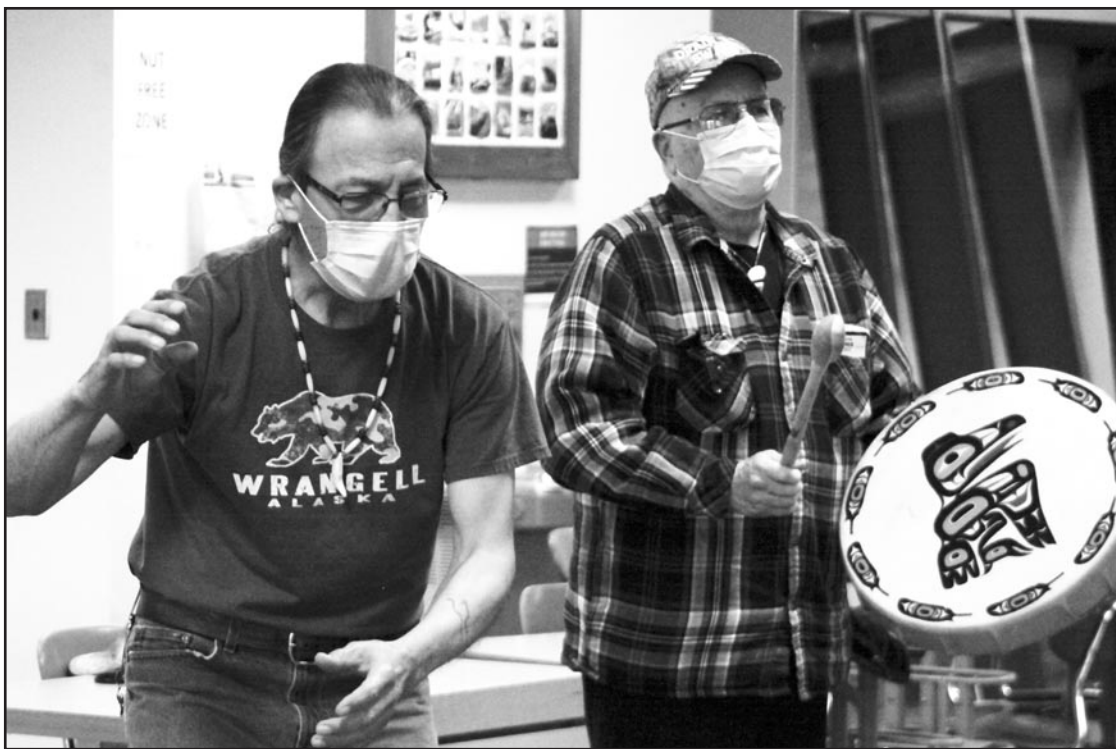


PHOTO BY CALEB VIERKANT/WRANGELL SENTINEL

Arthur Larsen (left) dances while Tom Gillen Sr. drums at the Johnson O'Malley dance group's practice last Friday. The Wrangell Native dance group will participate in a virtual event honoring Vietnam War veterans Monday.

## Wrangell Native dance group joins in 'welcome home' for Vietnam vets

By CALEB VIERKANT  
*Sentinel writer*

Wrangell's Johnson O'Malley Native dance group will participate in a virtual "welcome home" event for Vietnam War veterans Monday, Vietnam Veterans Day.

The event starts at 10 a.m., with the Wrangell dance performance set for 1:54 p.m., according to the event organizers' precise schedule.

The group will be one of over 20 participating in the welcome home, said Willard Jackson Sr., one of the event organizers. The welcome home is being put together by the Southeast Intertribal Collective. Lu Knapp and Virginia Oliver, with the JOM dancers, said it's a long overdue welcome home for Vietnam veterans.

The event will be streamed on the collective's Facebook page.

The veterans were often looked down upon when they returned home from the controversial war, Knapp and Oliver said.

"In my own opinion it's something the tribes

should have done a long time ago," said Jackson, also a member of the Intertribal Collective.


Jackson, living in Ketchikan, is a veteran of the Vietnam War. He was drafted in 1966, at 21 years old, out of Dutch Harbor, after returning to Alaska from trade school in Denver. He was attached to the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, he said, and was wounded by a booby trap in the war.

Returning home, Jackson said it became important for him to help care for veterans like himself. He became a tribal representative with the Department of Veterans Affairs, and helped orchestrate the dance groups for Monday's welcome home.


"As long as there's breath in my body I'll honor my brothers," he said.

While the welcome home will feature Native dance groups, Jackson said the event is meant to honor all Vietnam veterans, not just Natives. He encouraged anybody who knows a Vietnam veteran to let them know about the event and to tune in.

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### POLICY FOR LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

- 400 words or less with consent of publisher.
  - Typed or clearly written
  - Letters must be signed
  - Longer letters can be published as a paid ad
- The Sentinel reserves the right to edit any submissions.

The Deadline for submission is Monday at 5 pm for Thursday publication.

# Hospital contractors gift shaman's mask to new medical facility

*Sentinel staff*

The main contractors on the new Wrangell Medical Center have presented a shaman's apprentice mask to display in the facility.

"Crafted with red cedar, abalone, operculum shells and horsehair, the mask depicts a profound moment during the practice of a young shaman," the Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium said in a prepared statement March 21. "Shamans (Sgáagaa) were known to possess healing powers and bridge the gap between spiritual and natural worlds."

The mask, created by Haida artist T.J. Young, who was raised in Hydaburg, was donated by Juneau-based Dawson Construction and Saint Paul, Minnesota-based Wold Architects & Engineers, and will be displayed at the medical center, SEARHC said.

The hospital, a \$30 million project just off Zimovia Highway, fully opened last month. The health care campus now totals 44,500 square feet and includes an eight-bed acute care wing, 14-bed long-term care unit, expanded emergency department, and primary care, rehabilitation, imaging, laboratory and outpatient pharmacy services.

"Dawson is thrilled to have been able to partner with SEARHC on the Wrangell hospital, our 12th project together," Caleb McGraw, Dawson's project engineer, said in presenting the mask to SEARHC board member Lovey Brock on March 17.

"Our partners really delivered on this project — for SEARHC, our staff, and the community of Wrangell," Leatha Merculieff, hospital administrator, said in a prepared statement.

Dawson started clearing the site for construction in April 2019.



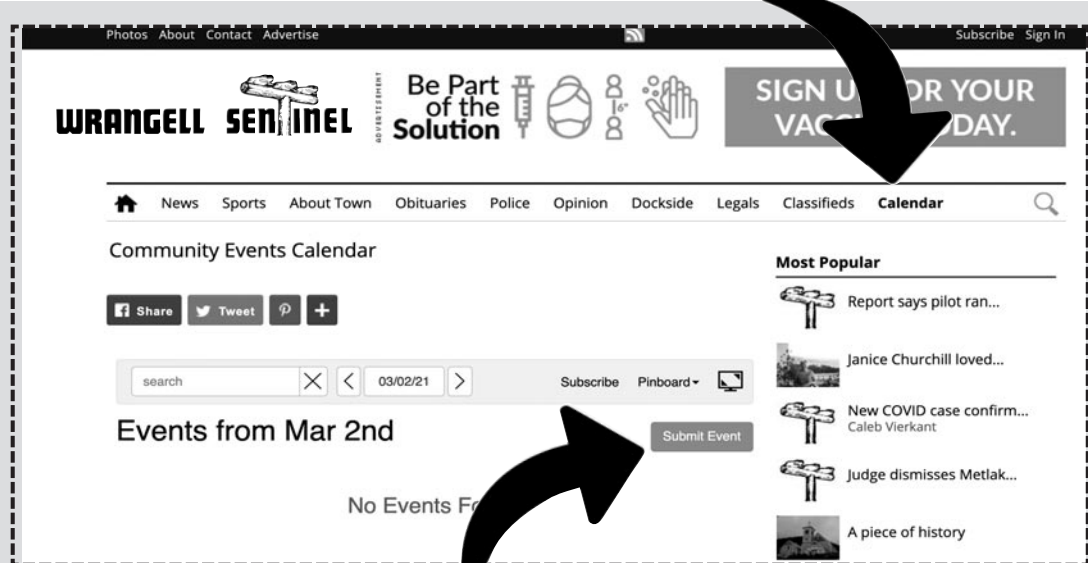
PHOTO COURTESY OF SEARHC

Caleb McGraw, Dawson Construction's project engineer for the Wrangell Medical Center, presented a shaman's apprentice mask to Lovey Brock of the Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium board of directors on March 17. The gift was to commemorate the successful opening of the new medical facility, and was donated by Dawson Construction and Wold Architects & Engineers.

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## Legislators push back against proposal to close DMV offices

JUNEAU (AP) - A plan by the governor to close six Division of Motor Vehicles offices and contract with private companies to provide services has been met with resistance from the state Legislature.

Under the proposal, the state would save money but the public would have to pay extra fees charged by the private companies for licenses and registrations.

The plan by Gov. Mike Dunleavy's administration to close the offices in Haines, Eagle River, Tok, Homer, Delta Junction and Valdez would save about \$500,000 a year in operating costs, according to the administration's calculations.

About 27,000 people live in those six community regions, the Department of Administration told lawmakers.

The proposal, unveiled in December, would encourage companies to start a public-private partnership with the state, Department of Administration Commissioner Kelly Tshibaka told lawmakers in a pair of meetings this month.

Residents could have to use the state's online services or, if they choose or are required to conduct their licensing in person, would have to pay any fee charged by the private opera-

tor or travel to a state office that is open.

First-time licenses and renewals for seniors over age 68 require an in-person application.

In addition, there are limits in state law as to what services private operators are allowed to perform. "For example, I have a (commercial driver's license) and I can't renew that online, nor can I renew it through one of the private companies," North Pole Sen. Robert Myers said.

State lawmakers across party lines have pushed back against the governor's proposal.

Rep. Zack Fields has introduced legislation that would disallow the division from closing any office that had been open on Jan. 1 in a community with at least 850 residents.

Meanwhile, Homer Rep. Sarah Vance introduced legislation with bipartisan support that would repeal the requirement for seniors and others to visit offices in person to renew their driver's licenses, which could allow them to use the state's online services.

Residents who want to get a federally required REAL ID license must also visit an office in person.



P.O. Box 798  
205 Front Street,  
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PHONE: 874-2301  
FAX: 874-2303  
EMAIL: [wrgsent@gmail.com](mailto:wrgsent@gmail.com)



# Lady Wolves lose in 2 close games

By CALEB VIERKANT  
Sentinel writer

The Wrangell Lady Wolves played two hard-fought games against the Metlakatla Miss Chiefs last week but were unable to bring home any victories. These were the first games in over a month for the Lady Wolves, due to COVID-19 restrictions or poor weather forcing several cancellations.

Coach Christy Good said having the opportunity to play more games would have helped the team, but she was proud of their performance regardless.

The first game last Friday opened with the Miss Chiefs taking the lead 14-8, and holding the lead in the second quarter 25-20. However, Wrangell was able to pull together and claim the lead in the third quarter 35-33. But they could not maintain it and Metlakatla won 46-41.

Saturday's game saw the Lady Wolves fight hard for the lead and hold on to it for a long time. The first quarter

ended with Wrangell ahead 10-9, then 26-17 at the end of the second quarter and 32-30 at the third. However, the Miss Chiefs pulled together a strong offensive game for the final quarter and won 46-38.

"Overall, they were good games, but we can do better," Good said. "We had two quarters each night that were good, and two quarters each night that were not so good."

Good praised several of her players for their performance this past weekend. Kendra Meissner played hard and had a 19-point game Friday, and Jamie Early fought hard as well. The eighth-graders on the team, Aubrey Wynne and Adeline Andrews, stepped up and played hard as well, the coach said.

If the team does not go to Southeast regionals, last weekend's games would be the last

# Wolves lose both games in Metlakatla

By CALEB VIERKANT  
Sentinel writer

Despite playing hard, the Wrangell Wolves lost both games to the Metlakatla Chiefs in last weekend's basketball games. This was the first set of games the Wolves were able to play in more than a month, as the COVID-19 pandemic or bad weather forced cancellation of several games this season.

"We fought hard," Coach Cody Angerman said. "Metlakatla's a tough place to play but we stuck with it."

Friday's game opened with a close quarter. Metlakatla took a lead 11-10. The Chiefs expanded their lead in the second quarter to 24-18, and then 37-28 in the third quarter. The Chiefs were able to blow through the Wolves' defense and pull far ahead in the fourth, winning 60-32.

Saturday's game went poorly for Wrangell. Metlakatla went ahead 8-2 in the first quarter, and though Wrangell tight-

ened the score at the end of the second quarter to 14-12, Metlakatla surged in the next two quarters and won 53-29.

"It was a tough weekend for us," Angerman said. "With travel and COVID and everything, not easy times to go on the road and play."

Angerman highlighted two of his players for their performance during the games. Brett Abrahamson had a good night the first night, he said, and Ryan Rooney played well in the second game.

The Metlakatla games will end the season for the Wolves if they do not travel to Southeast regionals scheduled for Saturday in Ketchikan.

Wrangell's secondary schools recently moved to distance learning on Tuesday after a staff member tested positive for COVID-19, and High School Activities Director Trisa Rooney said Tuesday it was uncertain if the teams would go to Ketchikan.

for the season.

Both the Lady Wolves and Wrangell Wolves were scheduled to travel to Ketchikan this weekend for regionals. How-

ever, Wrangell's secondary schools recently moved to distance learning after a staff member tested positive for COVID-19, and High School

Activities Director Trisa Rooney said Tuesday it was uncertain if the teams would travel to the regional tournament.

## Police report

**Monday, March 15**  
Citizen assist: Vehicle unlock.  
Agency assist: DOT.  
Motor vehicle accident.  
Traffic stop.  
Suspicious circumstance.  
Traffic stop.  
Agency assist: Alarm.

**Tuesday, March 16**  
Dog complaint.  
Agency assist: Line crew.  
Traffic stop.

**Wednesday, March 17**  
Domestic disturbance.  
Harassment.  
Served order to show cause.

**Thursday, March 18**  
Agency assist: TSA.  
Parking complaint: Vehicles parked in the school bus loading zone.  
Agency assist: Hoonah Police.

**Friday, March 19**  
Dog at large.  
Driving under influence on watercraft.  
Citizen assist: Vehicle unlock.

**Saturday, March 20**  
Summons service.  
Traffic stop: Citation for speeding.  
Agency assist: Line crew.  
Intoxicated person.

**Sunday, March 21**  
Disturbance.  
Agency assist: Alarm.  
Dog bite.  
Traffic stop.

There were eight agency assists for ambulance calls during this reporting period.

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THE PREP IS CHALLENGING.  
I'M TOO YOUNG.  
IS NOW REALLY THE TIME?



# FBI arrests Wasilla man on Capitol riot charges

ANCHORAGE (AP) – A Wasilla construction worker faces federal charges in the January breach of the U.S. Capitol.

Aaron James Mileur, 41, was arrested March 16 by the FBI on charges of knowingly entering a restricted building without lawful authority, violent entry and disorderly conduct on U.S. Capitol grounds. The charges stemming from the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol are misdemeanors.

The case had been sealed until his arrest. He made an initial appearance March 16 in U.S. District Court in An-

chorage, where federal prosecutors did not ask that Mileur be held in jail. Instead, they pushed for him to wear a GPS tracker.

Benjamin Muse, a government-paid public defender appointed to represent Mileur, declined comment in an email March 17 to The Associated Press.

Mileur is among more than 300 people charged in the attack on the U.S. Capitol, and federal prosecutors say at least 100 more could face charges. A mob of then-President Donald Trump's supporters stormed the building as

Congress was voting to certify Joe Biden's electoral win over Trump.

Like many others, the FBI says it tracked Mileur after being tipped off that he posted pictures and a video from inside the Capitol to his Facebook account. Someone who had a mutual Facebook friend with Mileur downloaded the photos and video and contacted the FBI's National Threat Operations Center.

A video filmed inside the Capitol that did not show Mileur's face was posted on both his account and another Face-

book group page, titled Save Anchorage, according to court documents. A second tipster contacted the FBI about the post. Save Anchorage organized last summer against the city's pandemic response and municipal assembly actions.

The Facebook account that appears to belong to Mileur – as identified by the FBI – contains a picture of Trump as the profile photo. The account has numerous conservative memes and commentary that were posted daily up the evening of March 15, the day before his arrest.

## Anchorage worries about high COVID counts in Mat-Su Borough

By ZAZ HOLLANDER  
Anchorage Daily News

PALMER – Health officials in Anchorage say they're worried about a COVID-19 transmission source that could delay efforts to move past the pandemic's human toll and crippling economic effects.

That source is the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, the government-wary neighbor to the north where some residents balk at public health recommendations for mask-wearing and vaccination.

"The large number of people who travel between the two communities daily makes high levels of disease transmission ... a concern," Anchorage health officials warned in a recent update to municipal assembly members.

Mat-Su, a region the size of West Virginia with more than 107,000 people mostly clustered

around the cities of Palmer and Wasilla, had daily case counts per 100,000 residents that were 2½ times higher than Anchorage at the start of the week of March 15. Test positivity was more than three times higher.

The region is the least vaccinated in the state.

"We're just hoping that something will change there," Dr. Janet Johnston, epidemiologist for the Anchorage Health Department, said March 16.

Before the pandemic, analysts estimated about a third of the adults in the Matanuska Valley commuted to Anchorage. Borough residents come to the city for shopping, meals, visits with friends.

"I'm very concerned we're going to reach the point where we have 50%, 60% vaccinated but we keep having these outbreaks," Johnston said. "The rates will come down but it

won't go away because we'll still have these pockets."

Anchorage officials earlier this month lifted capacity restrictions on businesses and eased gathering size limits but kept testing requirements for school sports competitions involving teams from outside the municipality.

Officials in Mat-Su said they lack the health authority to require masks. A proposal to require them within the city of Palmer late last year failed amid vocal opposition from hundreds of people.

Mat-Su this week remained Alaska's region with the highest number of COVID-19 cases per 100,000, according to the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services.

Case counts in Mat-Su rose

last month, when outbreaks linked to school activities without masks surfaced. Now the region continues to see relatively high rates of transmission linked mostly to family and friends getting together without masks on, especially at meals, or work-related outbreaks, health officials said.

"Probably behavior in the Mat-Su hasn't changed a whole lot," Rene Dillow, the state's Wasilla-based public health nurse manager, said March 17, referring to the local mask aversion. "It doesn't escape me that our numbers are the highest in the state and our vaccine rates are the lowest."

Mat-Su residents are different politically from their urban neighbor to the south. More than 70% of Mat-Su voters backed

former President Donald Trump. Republicans and supporters of the former president are the least likely to seek a vaccine for the coronavirus, an NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist survey found last week.

Generally, people in Mat-Su are also just vaccine-leery, Dillow said. The state is working with schools and providers to encourage more people to get COVID-19 shots.

The local steering committee for vaccine distribution has known since December that interest might lag, and they're seeing that now, she said. "There's a lot of people on the fence. There are still a lot of people that want it but it's slowing down a little bit. We're reaching that group that isn't really sure."

## New law requires engine cut-off switch on some boats

ANCHORAGE (AP) - A new federal law will require operators of recreational boats less than 26 feet in length to use an engine cut-off switch with a safety link that attaches the operator to the control device to shut off the engine if the operator is knocked from the helm.

The new law applies only to boats built beginning in January 2020.

Boats with the primary helm inside an enclosed cabin are exempt from the new law.

The U.S. Coast Guard said it receives reports every year about recreational vessel operators who fall off of or are suddenly thrown off their boat.

"During these incidents, the boat continues to operate with no one in control of the vessel, leaving the operator stranded in the water as the boat continues on course, or the boat begins to circle the person in the water eventually striking them, often with the propeller," the Coast Guard said in a statement.

The Coast Guard said the engine cut-off switch must be attached to the operator's clothing or personal flotation device, such as with a coiled lanyard or an electronic fob.

An operator is not required to use the shut-off switch when idling or docking the vessel.

## Motor fuel tax hike passes first committee

ANCHORAGE (AP) - Alaska lawmakers have advanced a bill that would double the state's motor fuel tax, which has not changed since 1970 and is the lowest in the U.S.

The bill passed in the House Transportation Committee on March 16 and moves next to the House Finance Committee for review. If it can pass the full House, it would go to the Senate, which approved a similar bill last year that failed to win passage in the House.

The bill would double the state's gas tax to 16 cents per gallon. Most of the \$34 million a year in additional revenue would go for highway maintenance. The bill has wide support among the state's business and industry groups, which argue it would help better maintain Alaska's roads.

"I think it's a reasonable fee to pay given the effect of inflation," said Anchorage Democratic Rep. Andy Josephson, the measure's primary sponsor.

The national average motor fuel tax is 25.68 cents a gallon, triple Alaska's current rate of 8 cents a gallon, according to a Jan. 1 report from the American Petroleum Institute. When other fees and sales taxes are added in, the national average is close to 37 cents a gallon.

The bill would also raise an estimated \$3.5 million a year to fight and prevent oil spills by increasing the surcharge on refined fuels by about half a penny per gallon. The state's spill response and prevention account is "woefully underfunded," Josephson has said.

A couple of Alaskans opposed to the motor fuel tax increase testified at the House Transportation Committee, arguing that the added cost will hurt residents who have been financially hurt by the coronavirus pandemic.

"It's just disproportional and wrong timing for a discussion like this to be happening," Bert Houghtaling, of Big Lake, testified at the transportation committee.

Mike Coons, Mat-Su chapter president of the conservative advocacy group Association of Mature American Citizens, said he is leading opposition to the bill. "Sadly, the leftist House will pass this out with full no-votes by our conservative caucus," Coons said. "I and others will do all we can to kill this in the Senate."

The bill would raise registration fees for electric vehicles by \$100 and for hybrids by \$50. It would also rebate the tax hike for marine fuel used on licensed commercial fishing vessels.



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# Alaska Fish Factor

By LAINE WELCH  
Fisheries columnist

## Early season Alaska halibut prices up about \$1 from last year

Halibut prices for Alaska fishermen for 2021 have started out significantly higher than last year, despite sluggish demand and transportation logjams in some regions.

The Pacific halibut fishery opened on March 6 and two weeks later only 80 deliveries were made, 46 at Southeast ports and 34 from the Central Gulf, totaling 355,524 pounds. Most landings appeared to be small lots that were purchased on consignment.

The first fish typically fetches higher prices and then drops off as the season progresses. No Alaska ports reported paying under \$5 per pound, whereas the 2020 price to Alaska fishermen averaged \$4.

Early prices at Sitka and Juneau, where there is daily air freight service, were reported at \$5.50 to \$5.75 a pound, up by \$1 from last year, and deliveries at Petersburg paid out at \$5.75. No ferry service and high costs for air freight bit into buying at nearly all Southeast ports where major processors said they aren't purchasing halibut until April or May.

Fishermen delivering to Homer were paid \$5.50 a pound, also up by more than \$1.

Except for small amounts bought on consignment, few halibut sales were reported at Kodiak where the price was reported at \$5 a pound.

Pacific halibut from Alaska has been getting hit hard in recent years by fish from Eastern Canada, mostly Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, with one Alaska buyer saying that region is now in the "front seat" for fresh market sales.

Federal trade data show that in 2020 over 10.5 million pounds of Atlantic halibut were imported to the U.S. from that region, valued at \$70.2 million. An additional 1.5 million pounds of Pacific halibut came into the U.S. from British Columbia, valued at \$22 million.

Alaska halibut fishermen also are getting pinched from fresh farmed halibut from Norway which last year totaled about one million pounds, valued at \$6.3 million.

Halibut caught by Russian fleets and processed into frozen fillets in China also is making inroads into U.S. markets and underselling all others. In 2019 that totaled two million pounds, valued at nearly \$7 million.

Alaska's catch limit for Pacific halibut is 19.6 million pounds. The fishery was extended by one month this year and will run through Dec. 7.

### New twists to seafood sales

Seafood sales set records at U.S. retail last year and the trend is continuing.

Sales of fresh, frozen and pantry shelf items increased by nearly 30% in 2020 to almost \$17 billion, outpacing meat, produce and deli items. Perceptions of

health and wellness are driving the surge, according to Seafood Source and a newly released Power of Seafood 2021 report from FMI - The Food Industry Association.

In a national survey, FMI found that one-third of Americans ate seafood twice a week in the past year and nearly 60% said they believed upping their intake boosts their immune systems.

A whopping 75% said they are eager to learn more about cooking seafood and want to be more knowledgeable about preparing and flavoring it.

How and where seafood is caught also was important and 36% said they preferred wild-caught fish "because it is more nutritious," the report said.

"I believe there is more acceptance about farm-raised seafood due to more awareness about farm-raised options. Also, salmon is a major species in seafood and often farm-raised salmon is lower priced compared to wild-caught options," Rick Stein, FMI vice president of Fresh Foods, told Seafood Source.

The FMI report also showed that plant-based imitations have become more accepted by U.S. shoppers. Another report by Barclays claims that the fake fish industry is estimated to be worth \$140 billion within the next decade, and could capture 10% of the \$1.4 trillion global meat industry.

Nearly 60% of frequent seafood eaters said they are likely to try such products, while 31% said they would not. There also was a high correlation with healthy eating, and 62% cited sustainability as a major reason for turning to fish imitations.

Overall, 71% of American consumers said they are concerned about seafood sustainability, with 41% saying it is a top factor in their buying choices.

That was most evident among younger consumers Seafood Source said, citing a survey by GlobeScan shared during a Seafood Expo North America panel that called it "a key trend among seafood purchasing."

Since 1999, GlobeScan has asked thousands of seafood consumers worldwide if they choose to reward companies that show they are "socially responsible." Through 2017, about 20% said they would consider doing so, but in 2020 that number increased to 38%.

The recent survey found that 70% of consumers want more information from companies about sustainability and 63% want to be able to trace their fish purchases back to a trusted source. But only 25% said they actually look for ecolabels on products, except for those aged 18-34.

"There's really a power in this generation," said Marife

Casem, Walmart senior manager of sustainability. "They read not only the labels but the story behind the packaging."

### ComFish takes virtual to a new level

Kodiak's ComFish Alaska trade show later this month puts the "social" back into social distancing.

Attendees can move in and out of forums and the trade show just like in-person events thanks to a new platform called Hopin.

"It is not some boring Zoom meeting where you just have to sit and listen, it is nothing like that," said Sarah Phillips, executive director of the Kodiak Chamber of Commerce, host of ComFish for 41 years. "Hopin is a completely immersive, engag-

ing social experience. I think social is that key word that we've been missing out on so many of these virtual meetings."

Nearly 30 exhibitors have signed up so far for the event, scheduled for March 30-31.

"It allows you to visit exhibitor booths, see what kind of specials and discounts they are offering, and engage face to face with the representative," Phillips said.

The forum line-up provides the same opportunities. They include appearances by Alaska's congressional delegation and state lawmakers, updates from the governor's office, marketing, fishery updates, crab research, sea stories and much more.

"Any questions that you type into the chat box will be an-

swered by the moderator or the presenters. And afterwards, some of our speakers are willing to go into a private, face-to-face session," Phillips said.

Hopin also provides for enhanced connections to socializing with anyone who's registered for ComFish.

"As soon as you log in, you'll be able to see every person that's registered. You can click on their name and request a video chat or schedule a meeting, the possibilities are endless. It's just like if you were at ComFish and you run into someone you haven't seen in a long time and say gosh, I'd love to catch up. And if there's a few people you see, you can get the whole gang together."

Registering for free at [www.comfishak.com](http://www.comfishak.com).

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### PUBLIC NOTICE

The Petersburg School District is seeking quotes from licensed providers for itinerant special education-related services in the following areas: Occupational Therapy, Speech Therapy, Physical Therapy, and Educational Psychology. These services include screening, evaluation, direct service contact, collaboration, and training for the 2021-2022 school year. Contract specifications are posted on the school district website at [www.pcsd.us](http://www.pcsd.us) and are available at the School District Office, 201 Charles W. Street, Petersburg, AK 99833. Contact Mara Lutomski at [exec@pcsd.us](mailto:exec@pcsd.us) or (877) 526-7656 ext 100 for additional information. Quotes are due by 4:00 pm on Friday, April 2, 2021.

Published: March 18, 25 and April 1, 2021.

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Duties include both skilled and semi-skilled work in landscape, mowing, weed-eating, grounds maintenance, repairs and construction of parks, playgrounds, ball fields and cemeteries.

Pay range \$14.00/hr. - \$16.00/hr DOE.

### PARK MAINTENANCE I

Duties include both skilled and semi-skilled work in landscape, mowing, weed-eating, grounds maintenance, repairs and construction of parks, playgrounds, ball fields and cemeteries.

Pay range \$16.00-18.00/hr DOE.

The full job descriptions and employment applications can be found online at [www.wrangell.com/jobs](http://www.wrangell.com/jobs).

# Alaska and Maine show the way for ranked-choice voting

FALLS CHURCH, Va. (AP) - An electoral reform that has taken root in the iconoclastic states of Maine and Alaska could be gaining traction nationwide.

Ranked-choice voting, a concept that was relegated to theoretical discussions among policy wonks for decades, is now being promoted by advocates in other states, building on last year's successful initiative campaign in Alaska — though the Alaska victory was tight, with a 3,778-vote victory out of 345,000 ballots cast.

A major push is under way in Wisconsin to enact similar reforms. New legislation in Virginia allows towns and cities to employ the concept beginning this year. Utah's legislature passed similar legislation this month that awaits the governor's signature. And in New York City, the Democratic mayoral primary is using ranked-choice voting for the first time.

Similar efforts could get a huge boost if the federal voting-rights legislation House Democrats approved survives Republican opposition in the Senate. It includes a provision requiring all voting equipment be able to accommodate ranked-choice voting, and mandates congressional study of the concept.

Virginia Democratic Rep. Don Beyer has been pushing the idea for more than five years. He said one of the biggest obstacles is a lack of familiarity that leads people to believe it's more complicated than it really is.

"It passes the nod test," Beyer said. "If you take two or three minutes to explain it, it makes sense, and you get that nod of recognition."

Fundamentally, ranked-choice voting works like this: Instead of voting for a single candidate, a voter ranks all of the candidates for a given office, from first to last. If one candi-

State of Maine Official Ballot General Election, November 3, 2020													
Instructions to Voters		President Vice President						U.S. Senator					
To vote, fill in the oval like this		1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th Choice	5th Choice	6th Choice	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th Choice	5th Choice	
To rank your candidate choices, fill in the oval:								Collins, Susan Margaret					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In the 1st column for your 1st choice candidate.</li> <li>In the 2nd column for your 2nd choice candidate, and so on.</li> </ul>								Gideon, Sara I.					
Continue until you have ranked as many or as few candidates as you like.								Linn, Max Patrick					
Fill in no more than one oval for each candidate or column.								Savage, Lisa					
To rank a Write-in candidate, write the person's name in the write-in space and fill in the oval for the ranking of your choice.								Write-in					

AP PHOTO/DAVID SHARP

date gets a majority of the first choices, that candidate wins. If not, the last-place candidate is eliminated, and the votes that went to that candidate are now reallocated to the second choices of those voters. The process is repeated until a candidate has a majority.

Maine voters approved ranked voting in federal races in a referendum in 2016, and it was used for the presidential election for the first time in 2020.

Alaska voters took the concept a step further, approving a variant called Final Four balloting: The top four finishers in a non-partisan primary advance to a general election that will be determined by rank-choice voting. The reforms weaken the hold that voters on either end of the ideological spectrum have on the process, and could help moderate Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski, who is up for re-election in 2022.

In a closed primary, pro-Trump Republicans could knock her out for her vote to convict former President Donald Trump at his impeachment trial. In a non-partisan primary, she can attract support from moderates in both parties to make the final four.

While ranked-choice voting can be a boon to moderates and independents, it also is a lifeline to third-party candidates. Under the current system, voters are reluctant to cast ballots for a third-party candidate on the theory that their vote would be wasted. In a ranked-choice system, if your first choice finishes at the bottom, your second choice can still be counted.

Opposition to ranked-choice voting reform has come primarily from the major political parties, said Jeremy Mayer, a political science professor at George Mason University in Virginia who has studied the issue.

"It weakens them as sources of power," Mayer said. Voters also are increasingly receptive. Mayer said the reforms promote civility because candidates won't want to alienate voters who might be willing to make them their second choice.

Opposition also comes from interest groups that can manipulate each parties' primary process to their advantage, said Katherine Gehl, founder of the Institute for Political Innovation. Her group advocates for reforms similar to those enacted in Alaska, though it recommends a Final Five system over a Final Four.

The primary benefit from ranked-choice voting reforms isn't necessarily a change in who gets elected, but rather the freedom it provides those who are elected to act beyond narrow political interests, Gehl said. "We are less concerned about who wins, but very focused on changing what winners have freedom to do and what they are incented to do," Gehl said.

## White House drops nominee amid Murkowski opposition

WASHINGTON (AP) - The White House is withdrawing its planned nomination of Elizabeth Klein to become deputy secretary at the Interior Department amid opposition from Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski.

Klein, who worked at Interior during the Obama administration, was among five women named by then-President-elect Joe Biden to serve as deputy Interior secretaries. But she was never formally nominated by the president and now won't be, a White House spokesman said Tuesday.

Klein's withdrawal was first reported by Politico.

Instead, Biden is expected to name Tommy Beaudreau, another former Obama-era Interior official, to be deputy secretary, according to two people familiar with the president's thinking. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly about a nomination that has not occurred.

Beaudreau is a former Interior Department chief of staff and served as the first-ever director

of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, an agency created after the disastrous BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010.

Just as important, politically, is that Beaudreau grew up in Alaska and is politically close to Murkowski, a former chair of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee who holds great sway over oil drilling, endangered species and other Interior Department issues.

Beaudreau's appointment is widely seen as an attempt to win favor from Murkowski, a moderate who is one of the few Senate Republicans willing to side with Democrats on contentious issues. Murkowski voted to convict former President Donald Trump during his second impeachment trial. She opposed Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh and helped shut down the Republican effort to repeal the Affordable Care Act.

A spokeswoman for Murkowski said the senator did not support Klein and made that known to the White House. Murkowski has told the

Continued on page 12



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# State finances

Continued from page 1

"The sense of urgency has been reduced," said Fairbanks Rep. Bart LeBon, in his third year as a member of the House Finance Committee.

The federal aid does not all have to be spent this year, and the state is waiting for more details on the spending rules, but it is one-time help, not a recurring federal funding program.

Lawmakers — and the public — have talked increasingly of the need for either a state sales tax or state income tax to help cover the cost of services as North Slope oil production continues its three-decade decline. But the only tax bill to move between committees in the first two months of this session is a measure to increase the state's eight-cent motor fuel tax, which has not changed since 1970.

The state has run a deficit about half of the past 30 years, drawing on savings to balance the budget. After running through billions of dollars of savings, lawmakers and governors have reduced the size of the annual Permanent Fund dividend to Alaskan every year since 2016 and drawn on Permanent Fund earnings to help pay for public services the past three years.

Work toward a long-term, sustainable fiscal plan for the state has been hung up on the divided politics of taxes, government spending, and use of

Permanent Fund earnings for dividends and public services.

"I think anything that takes away the sense of urgency makes it tougher to make the momentous decisions," Juneau Sen. Jesse Kiehl said of this spring's higher oil revenues and additional federal dollars.

The Department of Revenue in December estimated North Slope crude would sell at an average \$48 a barrel in the fiscal year that starts July 1. The department on March 16 updated its price forecast to \$61. As of Tuesday, Alaska oil was selling at \$61, as global markets anticipate a strong demand recovery for crude as the world pulls out of the pandemic later this year.

Higher oil prices "give us a little breathing room," said Fairbanks Sen. Click Bishop, co-chair of the Senate Finance Committee. "Let's be honest, we're not out of the woods."

"Any good news is welcome," Bishop said of the additional oil revenues and federal money. "We've just got our nose above water."

Last year, the state received \$1.25 billion in federal CARES Act money. This year, under the American Rescue Plan Act, the state general fund is in line to receive an estimated \$1.2 million. A big difference between the two programs, however, is that Alaska cities and boroughs did not receive any direct fund-

ing under the CARES Act, and the state shared almost half of its federal aid with municipalities last year.

This year, Alaska communities are set to receive somewhere between \$230 million and \$250 million directly through the Rescue Plan Act, though several cities and boroughs already have said it is not enough to cover their lost sales tax revenues and they are looking to the state to share some of its money.

Communities and businesses hit hardest by the loss of tourism last year and again this summer may need more help, said Anchorage Sen. Natasha von Imhof, a member of the Finance Committee.

Wrangell will receive about \$500,000 as its share of the direct federal aid, its Washington, D.C., lobbyist told the borough assembly earlier this month.

The CARES Act money arrived last year after lawmakers had ended their session, leaving it to the governor to make spending decisions, with minimal legislative control. This year, many in the House and Senate are looking to stay in session long enough to receive the federal rules and make the spending decisions on the Rescue Plan funding.

That could mean the legislative session extends into mid-May, at least, though anything past that would require law-

makers to extend or the governor to call a special session.

The federal money could be used for construction and maintenance projects, or to help cover the operating budget for public services, alleviating any need to dig deeper into Permanent Fund earnings to balance the budget.

Lawmakers and the governor still will need to debate the size of this year's Permanent Fund dividend, however, but the improved revenue picture at least has money on the table to fight over.

One state revenue loss in particular looks to be a natural fit for the latest federal pandemic aid. Under a provision of last year's CARES Act, corporations were allowed to take their heavy losses in 2020 and apply them to profits earned in prior years, applying for immediate

tax refunds for those years rather than wait to apply the losses to reduce future tax payments.

That provision will affect Alaska tax revenues because the state, by statute, accepts changes in the federal tax code. The Alaska Department of Revenue estimates the corporate tax refunds could cost the state treasury \$162 million this year and next, most of it going to non-oil corporations hurt by the pandemic's hit to the economy.

While designating the federal aid to replace that \$162 million could be an appropriate use of the money, von Imhof said the Legislature should take care not just to look at short-term budget gaps but also use some of the federal aid for long-term benefits, such as addressing the shortage of treatment services for alcohol and drug abusers.

# Murkowski

Continued from page 11

White House that she's "bucking for" Beaudreau, spokeswoman Karina Borger said Tuesday.

Borger declined further comment, but two people familiar with the matter said Murkowski was concerned that the progressive Klein would not be a sufficient counterweight to new Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, a former congresswoman who has criticized the oil and gas industry.

Murkowski was one of four GOP senators who voted in favor of Haaland, the first Native American Cabinet department head, but said she "struggled" with her decision, citing Haaland's views on oil drilling and other resource development.

"Alaska's prosperity is directly linked to decisions made by Interior," Murkowski said in

announcing her vote for Haaland earlier this month.

Beaudreau is currently a lawyer in the Washington office of Latham & Watkins and a member of the firm's Environment, Land & Resources Department. He took over the agency that oversees offshore oil and gas drilling a decade ago, despite having no oil and gas industry experience.

"I know how important resource development is to the state," he said in a 2013 interview. "It's the economic blood of the state. But I also know how important the outdoors are to everyone in Alaska. Everyone in Alaska wants to see that preserved and protected, he said.

Beaudreau later served as acting assistant secretary and then chief of staff under former Interior Secretary Sally Jewell.

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3-28

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