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Judge's ruling could shut down summer troll king salmon season

By GENE JOHNSON
Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — A ruling from a federal judge in Seattle could effectively shut down commercial king salmon trolling in Southeast Alaska — a valuable industry that supports some 1,500 fishermen — after a Washington state-based conservation group challenged the harvest as a threat to endangered killer whales that eat the prized fish.

The state and the Alaska Trollers Association filed a notice of appeal on May 3, the day after the judge's decision. The state is asking for a stay of the ruling, pending the appeal.

Wild Fish Conservancy, which brought the lawsuit, said the ruling would help more than just the southern resident orcas of British Columbia and Washington state. The group said that a stop to Southeast king trolling also would help struggling king salmon popula-

tions recover along the West Coast, as most of the kings caught in Southeast Alaska spawn in rivers to the south.

But fishing organizations condemned the ruling, saying it threatens Southeast Alaska with economic disaster and would do little or nothing to benefit the orcas.

The summer troll season is scheduled to start July 1.

Alaska Department of Fish and Game Commissioner Doug Vincent-Lang told the Ketchikan Daily News that he thinks the judge's ruling is limited to directed troll fisheries on chinook, so troll fishermen could still target other salmon species during the summer while the state's appeal plays out.

Tom Fisher, a commercial troll fisherman and president of the board of the Southern Southeast Regional Aquaculture Association, has been catching salmon around the area since 1973. He said he was "flat dumbfounded" when he heard of the judge's ruling.

"Currently I'm at my boat in Wrangell," Fisher told the Daily News during a phone interview last Thurs-

day. "I was slated to get hauled out of the water today, I've cancelled my haul-out. I've canceled some work that I was going to have done."

Fisher estimates he would have spent \$2,000 to haul out his boat and prepare for the summer troll season.

"I'm 63 years old and I'm sitting here looking at my livelihood washing out the door."

On May 2, U.S. District Judge Richard Jones in Seattle ordered the National Marine Fisheries Service to redo a biological opinion that is required for the Southeast king fishery to take place.

Officials have known for months the ruling was a possibility, and the federal agency has been working to draft a new biological opinion, said Linda Behnken, director of the Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association. The industry is hoping it will be released in time to allow fishing this year or that the judge's decision is put

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Wrangell lands on map in new Flight Simulator add-on

By MARC LUTZ
Sentinel editor

Want to fly in and out of Wrangell but don't feel like dealing with TSA, long lines and checking baggage? Now you can from the comfort of your home cockpit (aka, couch).

Northern Sky Studio, a software developer based in Kharkiv, Ukraine, recently released a Wrangell expansion pack for the popular Microsoft Flight Simulator, and it's just like being here.

Flight Simulator, like many long-running video games, had humble origins. Rather than the hyper-realistic detail of modern games, the simulator was mainly big green or blue blocks representing sky and land. Forty years after it was first introduced, the game gives easy-chair pilots views of mountains, oceans and current weather conditions all across the globe.

Oleh Shevchenko, the CEO of Northern Sky Studio, said he and his team are big fans of Alaska and Hawaii and have been developing the add-on packs for many of each state's airports.

"Wrangell is one of my favorite airports in Alaska," Shevchenko said in an email. "Wrangell was my second work for the flight sim community. It was created a long time ago, I guess 2015-2016 for X-plane 10. And now we recreate it in high quality for Microsoft Flight

Simulator 2020, even with the (Wrangell) terminal."

His team used photos of Wrangell from social media and they also work with people, such as the Juneau-based Tlingit artist Crystal Kaakeeyaa Rose Dementieff Worl, throughout Alaska to source their reference materials.

"Unfortunately, we could not personally visit all these airports, but we really wanted to," Shevchenko said. "I hope someday we can visit them. I greatly admire the beauty of Alaska."

Northern Sky Studio has also created add-ons for Kenai Municipal Airport, Ketchikan, Talkeetna, Seward, Yakutat, Juneau and Petersburg. Sitka is on their to-do list. Much of that depends on the war in Ukraine, Shevchenko said, as he and others might get called up to serve in the military soon.

Wrangell's add-on took the team roughly three months to complete, which Shevchenko said was longer than normal, but due to the war in Ukraine they've had to move their operation out of Kharkiv to a safer location, which slowed their work.

Brian Herman, owner of Canoe Lagoon Oysters, started using the program about 11 years ago, and his son, Aleksandr, 18, began using it around 10 years ago.

"The graphics back then

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A trip up the Stik



PHOTO BY MARC LUTZ/WRANGELL SENTINEL

Virginia Oliver, center, teaches Tlingit to a group of fourth graders from Evergreen Elementary School on May 2 on Cottonwood Island, about 10 miles up the Stikine River. The class, along with the fifth grade class and fourth graders from Rae C. Stedman Elementary School in Petersburg, learned hooligan fishing techniques, wilderness survival, salmon and bird species identification as part of an annual field trip.

Field trip up Stikine teaches lifelong lessons for students

By MARC LUTZ
Sentinel editor

A simple 30-minute trip by jet boat could be the outing of a lifetime for many Wrangell and Petersburg youths, and if they pay attention, it could mean extending that lifetime.

On May 2, a mix of fourth and fifth graders from Evergreen Elementary and Petersburg's Stedman Elementary traveled up the Stikine River on a warm, sunny day to Cottonwood Island to learn about everything from identifying wildlife to surviving the elements.

Field trips up the river have been going on for about 23 years, according to Wrangell teacher Brian Merritt, who got the idea from a former student. What started as just an outing has evolved into a daylong educational series.

"It all started when I had a child named Brooke Leslie in my class in third grade," Merritt recalled. "Her dad is (jet boat captain) Jim Leslie. She said, 'Hey, dad, is there any way we can bring the kids for a field trip up the river?' Jim, being a conqueror of any obstacle, said, 'Yeah, I think we can do that.'"

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No budget deal on PFD as Legislature enters final week

By JAMES BROOKS
Alaska Beacon

With a week remaining in Alaska's regular legislative session, leading lawmakers say they still haven't reached agreement on a deal to finish the state budget and end the session on time.

"We are meeting daily with the Senate ... just working on finding some way to come together to put this kind of 'endgame' package together, which I can tell you right now, we don't have the details as of yet," House Speaker Cathy Tilton, R-Wasilla, said last Friday.

Since 2015, odd-numbered years have brought tortuously long arguments over the budget as lawmakers debate the amount of the Permanent Fund dividend.

Without a state election season to encourage quick action, as in even-numbered years, regular legislative sessions have been followed by special 30-day sessions, and lawmakers have frequently approached the July 1 deadline for the start of the fiscal year.

This year, the debate is again over the Permanent Fund dividend. The Alaska

House has approved a draft budget that contains a dividend of about \$2,700 per recipient and a special one-time \$175 million boost to public school funding.

Paying for both of those items creates a substantial projected deficit, which would have to be covered by spending from the state's principal savings account, the Constitutional Budget Reserve. But spending from the reserve requires a supermajority of the House and Senate, and the House vote failed because of

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PHOTO COURTESY OF NORTHERN SKY STUDIO

The Wrangell Airport can be seen in this Microsoft Flight Simulator software add-on created by Northern Sky Studio, a Ukrainian software developer. The add-on offers hyper-realistic details of the airport, current time and weather conditions and even a look inside the terminal.

Borough to assess school buildings, pursue state repair grant

By CAROLEINE JAMES
Sentinel reporter

At its special meeting May 1, the borough assembly unanimously approved \$266,920 for engineers to assess the condition of Wrangell's three school buildings, in hopes of making the list for millions of dollars in state funding to repair and refurbish the decades-old structures.

The borough is hoping to get the repairs on the Alaska Department of Education's list of major maintenance projects at school buildings throughout the state. However, making the list is a highly competitive process that requires districts to demonstrate their need.

The department ranks projects based on urgency, then the Legislature dedicates a fixed amount to the entire list each year. Since this amount is typically not enough to cover all of the projects, the Department of Education funds as many of the projects as it can with the money provided, starting at the top of the list and working its way down.

"Everyone in the state is competing" for maintenance

dollars, Tammy Stromberg, who served last year as the Wrangell district's business manager, explained to the assembly last August.

In 2022, the Legislature approved \$100 million for school repairs but Gov. Mike Dunleavy vetoed the funding down to \$37.5 million.

The list before the Legislature this year totals \$277 million for 97 projects across the state, of which the state share would be \$215 million. The latest draft budget under consideration in the Senate Finance Committee would fund \$30 million of the projects, about the first nine on the list.

If Wrangell gets on the list for next year, and is high enough priority to get funded, the borough could receive state assistance for fiscal year 2025.

The assessment will help the borough make its case about the necessity of the school maintenance and repairs to the state. Work could include new roofs, fire alarm panels, exterior siding, boilers, window replacements, a new gym floor, paving for the elementary school parking lot and updated lighting and flooring. The three buildings are all between three and four de-

acades old.

The district is seeking \$6.5 million from the state — this money would be in addition to the \$3.5 million in bonds that voters approved at last October's municipal election.

The borough is hoping to move forward with the buildings' assessment quickly so that they can use the information that the engineers gather to prepare a grant application later this summer.

Juneau-based architecture firm NorthWind Architects won the project after a competitive bid process. Though the firms that submitted bids were very experienced, explained Capital Facilities Director Amber Al-Haddad, NorthWind had the most background developing condition assessments for the particular Department of Education grant that the borough plans to pursue.

The total amount the borough appropriated for the NorthWind contract is \$293,361 — slightly more than the estimated cost of the condition assessment. The additional money is a contingency, in case unexpected costs arise during the assessment.

Chamber of commerce brings raffle into compliance as it tries to rebuild finances

By CAROLEINE JAMES
Sentinel reporter

After the chamber of commerce received an anonymous tip two weeks ago that elements of its ongoing \$10,000 raffle were against state law, the organization is taking steps to bring the fundraiser into compliance.

The chamber held an emergency meeting May 2 to establish an end date for the raffle and discuss its financial needs in advance of the Fourth of July celebration, which it funds and organizes.

As originally designed, the chamber's raffle did not have an end date. Tickets would have been drawn and the \$10,000 prize would have been awarded after all of the 800 tickets had been sold.

The tipster notified the chamber that raffles must have the drawing date, time and location printed on the tickets. There is also a legal time limit on how long raffles can run — a drawing must occur before the end of the following calendar year.

After following up with the state's charitable gaming office, the chamber learned that they are also not allowed to use the 400th ticket drawn as the grand prize winner. Instead, they will need to randomly draw a single ticket for the grand prize.

In addition, since they advertised additional, non-cash prizes donated from local businesses, the chamber is required to provide those prizes as well, though not interspersed between the first and 400th tickets drawn as initially planned.

"It was a mistake on our part," explained outgoing Executive Director Brittani Robbins. "I've only had a permit for a year." As Robbins transitions from working at the chamber to working at Sweet Tides Bakery, her colleague Luana Wellons is correcting issues with the raffle. Wellons has also passed the gaming permit test.

"We're following all the steps that we need to do to fix it," Wellons said. "People make mistakes. We just need to rectify them in the correct manner."

Wellons plans to reprint all the unsold tickets with the date and location of the raffle drawing and contact every person who has purchased tickets to explain the changes. Ticket sales will be put on hold until these adjustments are complete. "I know people are already going to be upset but we want people to be the least amount of upset over the changes," she said.

Chamber staff and board members unanimously voted to set Aug. 15 as the raffle's end date. This will allow them to capitalize on the economic

boost that the town experiences during the summer months. "There's going to be money in town then," said Mike Lockabee, who spoke at the meeting. "There's not a whole lot now."

It will also give them time to sell tickets — as of last Thursday, 259 of 800 had been sold. Each ticket costs \$50, meaning that only \$2,950 would be left over for the chamber after the prize payout if community members don't continue to purchase them.

At the meeting, Robbins strongly encouraged chamber board members to increase their ticket sales because the organization is struggling financially.

Robbins said she was "shocked to discover" that the chamber had been operating at a deficit for six years in early 2023 when she saw its financials. "I had no idea we were running in the red," she said. She has been with the chamber since 2021; the organization's financial woes predate her tenure.

On May 1, the chamber asked the borough for a one-time \$25,000 contribution, which would be in addition to the \$27,000 the borough already gave to its general budget this fiscal year. The money would assist the organization with expenses like fireworks, utilities and insurance for the costly Fourth of July celebration.

Anything that wouldn't benefit the entire community — like prize money and wages — would be ineligible for funding and Borough Manager Jeff Good would approve all expenses before reimbursing the chamber.

The assembly postponed a decision on the request until its May 23 meeting.

Assemblymember David Powell attended the chamber's emergency meeting to explain his reasons for the postponement. "What constitutes an emergency to other people does not always constitute an emergency to the city," he said. He also expressed concern about the chamber's spending practices.

According to documents submitted to the assembly by the chamber, the total Fourth of July celebration cost in 2022 was around \$110,000. Fireworks, one of the event's biggest ticket items, cost around \$12,000. Wages for the royalty competition contestant and assistants came to around \$31,000 total. The chamber spent just under \$12,000 on T-shirts and swag, including coffee mugs, hats and handkerchiefs.

The chamber's \$7,000 investment in swag was "kind of a bust," said Robbins, but the T-shirts sold well. That year, the annual royalty fundraising

competition lost nearly \$27,000.

This year's events and activities, including street games, canoe rolling and log races, have all been sponsored by businesses and individuals, saving the chamber around \$8,000, Robbins estimated.

As of early April, Robbins estimated that the chamber had \$34,000 total in all of its accounts. Thanks to sponsorships, staffing cuts and the addition of booth and parade entry fees, chamber board president Bill Burr is confident that this year's celebration will move forward as planned, regardless of the assembly's decision. "If the money doesn't come in from the assembly, then we are probably covered for the Fourth of July," he said.

However, "it will eat up our remaining funding" and possibly affect the other seasonal events the chamber sponsors, like the pumpkin patch and Christmas tree lighting.

"We can't fix what happened in the past," he said. "All we can do is go forward. We've spent this year trying to figure out what are our costs, how can we stand on our own. The chamber is a business for businesses, so we're trying to run it like one."

Community members who would like to weigh in on the chamber's financial request to the borough can address the assembly at its May 23 meeting.

Borough brings relief, installs public restrooms downtown

By LARRY PERSILY
Sentinel writer

The first cruise ship of the season is scheduled to tie up in Wrangell on Thursday, and borough crews have been working to get new restrooms ready for visitors — and locals — who need another option while walking around downtown.

The borough has installed two portable units just off Front Street, next to the 56° North shop, near the intersection with Campbell Drive.

These are not your routine porta-potties with holding tanks; they are portable units set in place and hooked up to municipal sewage and water lines — sinks included.

One of the facilities is a single, large enough for people with disabilities to access the restroom. The other unit is a double.

The portables are used, but in excellent condition, said Kate Thomas, Parks and Recreation Department director. The borough got them at a good price, she said, about \$15,000 for the pair. Adding in site preparation, sewage and water line installation, a power pole, plus eventual fencing, benches and flower planters, the total cost will come to about \$60,000, she said.

That's about half of what borough officials had estimated last fall.

The new restrooms will provide another downtown option

to the borough's permanent public restrooms behind the Elks Lodge and the facilities at the Nolan Center.

Other Southeast communities have added similar temporary restroom facilities in their downtown areas to accommodate the growing number of summer tourists.

The Public Works Department handled the installation, with Municipal Light and Power, the Capital Facilities Department and Port and Harbors Department helping, too. Parks and Recreation is responsible for custodial and maintenance services, Thomas said. "It's been a team-building activity," she said last week.

There was an old utility line stub nearby the site, explained Tom Wetor, Public Works director. That existing connection point reduced the length of new underground pipe needed to about 25 feet, he said.

The borough is subleasing a small area for the restrooms from Samson Tug and Barge, which holds a lease on the property, Thomas said.

The fence, built of recycled plastic for low maintenance, will shield the restrooms from the freight storage area.

The restrooms will be open 24 hours a day, the same as facilities in borough parks, and likely will be pulled out late September and put into winter storage, Thomas said.

Celebration of Life for Dave Hartung

May 20, 2023
2 p.m. to 5 p.m.
Rayme's Bar

Bring your
favorite appetizer
to share.



FROM THE PUBLISHER

Can't hide tax owie under bandages

By LARRY PERSILY
Publisher

The great debate in Alaska over taxes sounds similar to the age-old question of whether it is less painful to yank off the bandage quickly or peel it off slowly and gently.

I have found that it just doesn't matter all that much how I pull off the bandage. Neither way is pleasant, especially when there is scab underneath.

It's the same for taxes in tax-free Alaska: None of the options are pleasant; all will hurt at first; there are a lot of political scars and scabs that will break open no matter what tax is adopted, an income tax or a sales tax.

Regardless, the only way the state budget and public service wounds will ever heal is to stop picking at them. For that to happen, a majority of legislators and the governor need to agree on a real fiscal plan, not just talk of a plan or talk of getting together later to talk about a plan.

Until then, too many legislators and the governor are doing the equivalent of pulling back the bandage ever so slowly. Not even pulling it off, just peeling it back for a peak to see which of their constituents cry out the loudest.

To their credit, there are more tax proposals floating around the legislative pharmacy this year than in a long time. That's good, actually very good. It's the medicine Alaskans need to improve their communities and provide for a healthy future.

It shows that a growing number of lawmakers are doing the math and realizing the state is short of enough dependable revenue to fund quality

schools, state troopers, social services, new roads, maintenance on what we already own and the necessary transition to renewable energy projects.

Without a real fiscal plan, and taxes, Alaska continues with self-inflicted cuts and shortages in public services. Even worse, paying for services by drawing down savings until they are gone is not a plan, it's terminal.

But there is hope. A growing number of legislators are listening to constituents who are increasingly calling for a reasonable tax structure to ensure that the state can provide services in its communities and for its residents, particularly students.

After 44 years of tax-free life, more Alaskans are acknowledging that oil cannot pay for everything.

After 44 years of tax-free life, more Alaskans are acknowledging that oil cannot pay for everything.

Some of the fiscal prescriptions on the legislative table include an income tax that would apply only to people making more than \$200,000 a year. There is a proposal for a personal income tax that would be capped at the amount of each year's Permanent Fund

dividend, so that no Alaskan ever pays more in taxes they receive in the annual PFD. There is a proposal for a flat \$30 tax on anyone earning money in Alaska, with the revenue intended — but not guaranteed — for school construction and repairs.

There is also an ill-conceived proposal for a state sales tax that would not exempt food, medicines or even funerals, as if the sponsor is intent on proving that only death and taxes are absolute.

The options are out there; the need is apparent; the budget math is clear. Alaskans need to make a choice, pull off the bandage and pay something toward the services provided by the state.

EDITORIAL

Ukrainian software developer lands at Wrangell airport

Virtually that is, not literally. But maybe someday for real Oleh Shevchenko, the boss of Northern Sky Studio, a software development company based in Kharkiv, Ukraine, and his team recently created a computer-generated Wrangell airport add-on for Microsoft Flight Simulator.

The graphics are so good you expect to see someone you know in the terminal and then spot your house from the air as you take off.

No one on the development team has ever been to Wrangell, but Shevchenko said he and his co-workers are big fans of Alaska and Hawaii. "I hope someday we can visit them. I greatly admire the beauty of Alaska."

That could be a busy visit for the Ukrainians — they also have created add-ons for the popular flight simulator software for Ketchikan, Petersburg, Juneau, Yakutat, Kenai, Seward and Talkeetna.

The team searched social media for photos of Wrangell and also worked with real people, including Juneau-based Tlingit artist Crystal Kaakeyáa Rose Demientieff Worl, to gather reference materials for their graphics. Their flight simulator add-on includes realistic images of the runway, airport terminal and tarmac.

Of course, in many of the images, it looks like a gray, rainy day in Wrangell. Just what you would expect from realistic computer graphics. No doubt the view is sunnier for their Hawaiian airports.

Although they have been successful in creating virtual airport for gamers, pilots and anyone who wants to try landing when the wind is blowing down the Stikine River, it has been slow going for the team of software team. Writing code and building graphics for the Wrangell airport took the crew about three months, which is longer than normal. Understandably, Russia's war on Ukraine has disrupted their work, causing the Northern Sky Studio team to move their operation out of Kharkiv to a safer location.

Hopefully, a temporary move, and someday, after the terrible war ends, they can get back home. Then maybe they could come to Wrangell to see for themselves what they created at the keyboard. Until then, their work gives people in Wrangell another reason to hope for peace in Ukraine.

— Wrangell Sentinel

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hardings say thank you, and welcome new owners of the Sourdough Lodge

After nearly 40 years and two generations of Hardings having a dream, building and operating that dream, the Sourdough Lodge now has a new generation of owners, the John and Zach Taylor families of Wrangell.

We enjoyed every minute of our journey. To our loving families, old friends, our new friends and the community of Wrangell, Darlene and I want to say a heartfelt thank you for your continuous support and for all the wonderful memories during those years which we will share for the rest of our lives and hopefully you as well.

In addition, we want to say thank you to John and Zach for beginning their dream for the Sourdough Lodge, with the continued support from all who love Wrangell, Alaska,

and our special way of life in Southeast Alaska.

*Wrangell forever.
Darlene and Bruce Harding*

Beware of cruise visitors overwhelming smaller Southeast communities

Large cruise ship tourism is ruining Juneau. We will see up to six large ships at least one day a week this year. We expect 1.7 million tourists plus crew. In addition to that, smaller ships and air travel will bring in even more tourists.

My neighborhood is inundated with vehicular traffic. Walkers stream by and gawk at me working in my yard. Helicopters buzz overhead.

My advice to Wrangell and Petersburg is to put the brakes on now before your nice towns are gone six months of the year.

*Kim Metcalfe
Juneau*

Flight Simulator

Continued from page 1

were not very good," Herman said. "We didn't have a computer at the time that had a graphics card that could even run it back then. We had to turn the graphics way down."

His son has used the program in the past to help him practice flying, using the same plane Herman owned, and eventually getting his private pilot's license.

"He would do it to familiarize himself with what he should be looking for in the terrain," Herman said. "It's

pretty amazing how accurate the stuff is, especially for the terrain."

The modern version can also sync to each flight paths' time of day and current weather conditions. Even though Aleksandr had to take the program off his computer because it ate up so much memory, he's still pursuing a commercial pilot's license.

Brian Ashton, a Wrangell-based pilot, uses the current version of Flight Simulator with virtual reality goggles and full immersion. He's used the program since Version 4

was released in 1989. He added another Wrangell update "advertised on the Flight Simulator software and it was not so good," he said. "I normally don't do the visual upgrades because I'm using the software for keeping my instrument skills up, which isn't enhanced by the visuals."

The Wrangell airport add-on is currently available through simmarket.com for \$14. Shevchenko said they hope to get the add-on included on the official Flight Simulator website in the near future.

PFD legislation

Continued from page 1

opposition from the predominantly Democratic House minority.

That's left the House budget proposal partially unfunded, and the Senate has advanced an alternative.

That alternative includes a dividend of about \$1,300, the same one-year increase in state funding for schools, and no spending from the budget reserve.

During a May 2 news conference, leading senators said they're unlikely to approve spending from the reserve, which stands at \$2.6 billion. The state drew more than \$1 billion from the reserve to cover deficits in the budgets that ended in both 2020 and 2021.

"This is all a process, a negotiation process, a compromise that has to take place. I think we've made it clear where we are. I believe

there's a real disinterest among most senators to go into our savings account when (savings) are as low as they are," said Senate President Gary Stevens, R-Kodiak.

House Minority Leader Calvin Schrage, an Anchorage independent, said he "kind of" likes the Senate budget, "so I say we vote for that thing." However, although he supports the Senate budget plan, he doesn't see the votes in the House to pass it.

"What is the other option, and where do you go from here?" Schrage said.

"We still have lots of time. There's still lots of ways we can get to the end," Tilton said.

The adjournment deadline is May 17.

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Policy for Letters to the Editor

- Letters should be typed or clearly written and no longer than 400 words.
- All letters must be signed by the writer and include a phone number and any affiliation with a group which pertains to the letter.

The Sentinel reserves the right to edit any submissions.

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Seeing sites and crooning tunes part of Close Up trip to D.C.

By MARC LUTZ
Sentinel editor

Learning about politics, visiting memorials and even singing for Sen. Lisa Murkowski were all part of a recent trip four Wrangell students took to Washington, D.C.

The yearly Close Up program took Sarah Merritt, of the Wrangell Legislative Information Office, along with students Alisha Armstrong, Ander Edens, Sean McDonald and Spencer Petticrew to the nation's capital and New York City for 10 days at the end of April.

The purpose of the program is to expose students to the worlds of business and politics, and giving them a chance to connect with culture, policymakers and historical sites.

"Students gain a greater understanding of the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy and develop skills to carry out those rights and responsibilities," Merritt said. "They also learn how to listen and debate differing political and policy points of view with tolerance and respect."

Along with sightseeing in Washington, the students attended professional development workshops, networked with other students from around the country and met with Sens. Murkowski and Dan Sullivan and Rep. Mary Peltola.

Edens, a music student, was put on the spot by Merritt who talked him into singing an impromptu performance of "America the Beautiful" for Murkowski, "bringing her to tears and receiving a



PHOTO COURTESY OF SARAH MERRITT

From left: Ander Edens, Sean McDonald, Alisha Armstrong and Spencer Petticrew stand in Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C., during the Close Up trip the last week of April.

loud clapping ovation from the crowd," Merritt said.

Each student took away something different from the trip, she said, which also took them to Arlington National Cemetery, the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Is-

land, the 9/11 Memorial, Wall Street and Broadway.

"Alisha Armstrong was very moved by sitting in Ford's Theatre where President Abraham Lincoln was shot, and (while watching) the show 'Shout, Sister,

Shout! The Untold Story of Gospel and Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe,'" Merritt said.

In New York City, Petticrew's favorite site was the Metropolitan Museum of Art, McDonald's was being at the top of 30 Rockefeller Center, Edens enjoyed Times Square and Armstrong was impressed with Central Park.

Merritt said the four students reminded her of being with the characters from the TV sitcom "The Big Bang Theory."

"I took Sheldon, Bernadette, Leonard, Raj and Wolowitz," she joked. "Two kids were a combination of two of those characters. They got so excited over everything and that made me feel so good because this trip is my passion and I love sharing it with the kids."

This year was the smallest group Merritt has ever taken with her. The first year, she took five to get a feel for the trip, but the next year she had 20 in tow.

Students must raise funds to take the trip, which is around \$2,500 per student. Merritt said she found the kids who put in the effort to raise the funds get more out of the trip.

Have any Close Up alumni from Wrangell ever been inspired to pursue a life in politics?

"I have students who have said that they were going to go into either economics or politics due to this trip and a few have that I know of," she said. "Even if they don't, it exposes them to so much in regard to entertainment and even food!"

Tlingit & Haida distributes herring eggs to tribal citizens

By CAROLINE JAMES
Sentinel reporter

Tribal citizens lined up outside the WCA carving shed on the sunny afternoon of May 2 to collect boxes of herring eggs from the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska.

The Tlingit and Haida Traditional Food Security program purchased over 17,000 pounds from spawn-on-kelp fishery permit holders in the Craig and Klawock area, according to the Ketchikan Daily News. The eggs are being distributed in 21 designated communities, including Wrangell, which received 463 pounds of eggs in about 100 4.5-pound boxes for tribal citizens.

These tiny eggs have a large cultural and nutritional value. They are packed with protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin D, iron, zinc and other nutrients, not to mention the health benefits of the kelp they are harvested on.

When Pacific herring spawn, their adhesive eggs stick to whatever is nearby, since this increases the eggs' chances of survival. Kelp is a common natural substrate; harvesters some-

times use hemlock branches as a man-made substrate.

Oral histories and archaeological research indicate the importance of herring roe in early Tlingit and Haida communities. Herring were abundant at occupied sites throughout coastal Alaska and the presence of herring played a role in the establishment of Sitka, Klawock, Juneau, Prince of Wales and Wrangell, according to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

"It's been our traditional food for ever since the Tlingit first came down here," said Sue Stevens, who represents Wrangell on the Tlingit and Haida Tribal Assembly. She's eaten them her whole life and associates the food with springtime, since herring usually spawn around the end of March. "It's so good," she said. "It tastes like the ocean."

Stevens likes to eat her herring eggs with a combination of soy sauce, hooligan oil and butter. "You blanch them," she said. "You can't let the eggs turn white. They'll be like rubber then. You just warm them." She also has a killer herring egg salad recipe that involves lettuce, tomato, cilantro, green onions

and mayonnaise.

For others in line to collect their herring eggs, the food can be an acquired taste. Amber Wade and Janice Kalkins picked up boxes not for themselves but for their relatives, who are more enthusiastic than they are about the food's slippery texture.

The flavor is "really hard to describe," said Harry Churchill, holding the box he had just picked up from Tlingit and Haida. "A lot of people don't like it. I don't know why." He has a taste for strong sea flavors, he explained, including seal oil, which he was introduced to while he was working up north for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He first tried herring eggs about 60 years ago. Like Stevens, he likes to eat them with soy sauce.

Tlingit and Haida serves over 35,000 members worldwide. Its Traditional Food Security team was established in 2021 in response to COVID-19. "Many of our communities are seeing food shortages like never before in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and ongoing issues with the Alaska Marine Highway system," wrote President Richard Chalyee Éesh Peterson in a weekly update. The food security department was set up to "ensure we can protect, enhance and provide for our way of life for generations to come."

Senior center cuts in-person meals and ride services to four days a week

By MARC LUTZ
Sentinel editor

On June 1, the Wrangell Senior Center will cut back its in-person meals and ride services after a loss of funding.

Juneau-based Catholic Community Services, the organization that operates the senior center, announced on May 1 that there would no longer be any funding from COVID-19 emergency relief federal programs, making it necessary to reduce operating hours.

"With the White House's announcement that the coronavirus public health emergency is officially ending, there is no longer emergency relief money available to support the senior operations," wrote Brigette Guzy, human resources director for Catholic Community Service, in a statement.

Instead of Monday through Friday, the Wrangell Senior Center will serve lunch Tuesday through Friday from noon to 1 p.m., with an additional shelf-stable meal given out on Friday for people to take home. An extra meal will be distributed at that same time to seniors who get their meals delivered.

According to Solvay Gillen, site manager for

Wrangell, meals will only be delivered to seniors who are housebound. Otherwise, seniors are encouraged to go to the center for lunch.

"The food is still available. We just want people to start moving around and seniors to get out of their house," she said. "We're still here, just come in and eat with us."

Rides for seniors for errands, medical appointments and shopping will still be offered through the center, though only Tuesday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.

"We're unable to be open on Mondays until we get more money in the door to be frank," Guzy said in a phone interview last Thursday. "Staffing is a big expense. We're having to look at positions at all the sites. Some are being cut and some are being reduced in hours."

The assistant cook position in Wrangell is one such job being cut. The four-member staff is going from a five-day work week to four days, Gillen said. The current driver will be leaving for another job this summer due to cutbacks, so that position will open up.

During the pandemic, the center delivered more than 70 meals a day throughout town. The center reopened to in-person dining more than a year ago, five days a week, with deliveries on request.

Some of the financial burden on the center is lifted in Wrangell since the borough covers fuel and rent for the building.

Gillen said employees are adapting and making the center fun for seniors.

"We're going to start doing activities again," she said. "Starting next month, we'll have an outing planned for out the road."

They will also bring back the in-person bingo and other activities at the center.

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New sweet candy, embroidery shop opens in downtown

By CAROLEINE JAMES
Sentinel reporter

As the days get longer and the weather gets warmer, Wrangellites are gearing up for a fun-filled summer. And thanks to a new downtown business that will offer candy, inflatables, décor, custom clothing and more, the community's seasonal festivities are about to get even sweeter.

Scott and Keeleigh Curley's new Front Street shop, Midnight Oil, will hold its grand opening starting at 10 a.m. on Saturday, one of the borough's two sales tax-free days in 2023.

Midnight Oil will offer the community "a little bit of everything," said Scott. "We tried to get niches that weren't in town already." In the shop's back corner, there's an old-timey candy counter where customers can purchase cotton candy, gummy rings and gummy sunny-side-up eggs. "It's like an old-school, nostalgic candy store down south where you can go pick your candies by the pound," he added.

The store's eclectic mix of merchandise also includes house plants, custom T-shirts, embroidered bags and giant inflatables for rent.

Inflatables are currently only available through Parks and Recreation, Scott explained, but Midnight Oil will allow people to set up its bouncy houses in their backyards for fun summer functions. The Curleys will also create balloon displays for weddings and other special events.

About a year ago, Keeleigh learned how to embroider and started selling her work on an Etsy shop called Two Under Two Custom, in honor of the family's two children under 2 years old. Once the family's brick-and-mortar location opens, she plans to phase out the online business.

However, operating Two Under Two online taught her how to use an embroidery machine and do direct to film transfers — a heat-based printing method for putting designs on clothing. She's already been commissioned to make custom shirts for Wrangell businesses and plans to continue offering this service once the store opens.

Their children also inspired the new store's name. Starting a business while raising a family has meant a lot of late nights for the couple, burning the midnight oil. "It's going to be a lot of work in the foreseeable future," said Scott. "That's where Midnight Oil came from."

The Curleys also felt that the name matched the "old-school Wrangell rustic vibe" they are going for.

The pair has had plans to open a candy shop in Wrangell since 2020, but the pandemic postponed their plans. Now that the town's business climate is looking up, they decided to open in advance of the summer tourism season. "I wanted to do a candy store originally, and then we just kind of combined all of the things into one," said Keeleigh.

The shop will be the Curleys' first ex-



PHOTO BY CAROLEINE JAMES/WRANGELL SENTINEL

Scott and Keeleigh Curley in their new candy shop, Midnight Oil, with their two youngest children: Beau (left) and Scottie. They also have two older children: Kelowna Morelli and Kaydin Mill.

perience as small business owners. Scott worked for Alaska Marine Lines for 16 years and Keeleigh has a wide range of retail experience at small shops in Spokane, Washington, where she grew up.

Most recently, she worked for the borough Port and Harbors Department. "We wanted to do our own thing and didn't want to have kids in day care," explained Scott.

State senator proposes tax to help pay for school maintenance

By LARRY PERSILY
Sentinel writer

State Sen. Click Bishop remembers his first paycheck as a teenager in Fairbanks in the early 1970s. His boss explained the \$10 deduction for the state's so-called school head tax.

"That pays for your education," the boss told his young employee. "I've never forgotten that," said Bishop.

The Legislature in 1980 abolished the small education tax, along with Alaska's personal income tax and a tax on business gross receipts. The state was getting rich from oil and a majority of lawmakers saw little need for taxes.

Bishop, now in his 11th year in the Senate, is making his fourth attempt to bring back the education tax — with some changes.

The \$10 tax raised about \$2.5 million a year.

Senate Bill 132 would set the tax at \$30 on every wage earner or self-employed person in Alaska — non-residents, too — and would raise an estimated \$14 million a year from the higher tax rate and larger workforce than 40 years ago.

The legislation also proposes a new name: Educational Facilities Maintenance and Construction Tax. The intent is that the Legislature could appropriate the money to help with a long list of major repairs and school construction needs across the state.

The Department of Education's major maintenance priority list currently totals \$280 million for 96 projects statewide. Lawmakers can appropriate money each year toward the list, but the needs far outpace the funding.

"We've got to get ahead of that curve," Bishop told the Senate Education Committee on May 1, when Senate Bill 132 received its first hearing.

The bill moved out of the Education Committee and is waiting for a hearing in Senate Finance. The measure likely will hold over for the 2024 Legislature in the two-year legislative cycle.

"New revenues are needed to be part of any conversation about Alaska's (budget) deficit, Bishop said at the Education Committee hearing. "This bill will hopefully go the first step" toward directing more money toward school facilities.

There are more than 700 municipally owned school facilities across the state, Nils Andreassen, executive director of the Alaska Municipal League, told the committee.

Unfortunately, "more and more districts" are not even bothering to apply for a spot on the Department of Education list because of the cost of preparing a building condition survey and the low probability of receiving funding, he said. "The return on investment is so little."

Wrangell is spending almost \$300,000 for an engineers report on its school buildings in hopes of getting on the state priority list for funding next year. The borough and school district are seeking \$6.5 million in state funding to go along with \$3.5 million approved by Wrangell voters last year to repair the community's decades-old school buildings.

Though this is Bishop's fourth try at bringing back the tax, others have come before him. His bill this year is the 15th attempt to restore the tax, he told the Edu-

cation Committee — seven times sponsored by Democratic legislators, seven times by Republicans, and once by then-Gov. Wally Hickel. The tax had been around since 1919 before it ended after 60 years, Bishop said.

An added benefit to raising money destined for school repairs would be collecting something from non-residents working in the state, said the senator, a lifelong Alaskan active in union-sponsored job training programs and commissioner at the state Department of Labor from 2006 to 2012.

In his sponsor statement for the bill, Bishop cited state and federal statistics that show tens of thousands of non-residents work in Alaska each year, earning an estimated \$2.7 billion in 2021.

Legislator proposes limiting income tax to amount of Permanent Fund dividend

By LARRY PERSILY
Sentinel writer

An Anchorage legislator has added another idea to the growing list of tax proposals before lawmakers who are struggling to cover the state's revenue needs.

Rep. Zack Fields has proposed a personal income tax limited to no more than the amount of each year's Permanent Fund dividend. "It's a net-zero tax on Alaskans," he said last week.

No matter how much an individual earns, the annual tax would not exceed the amount of the PFD.

In addition, anyone earning less than \$75,000 a year would be exempt from the tax.

The second-term Democrat described his bill as, "The simplest possible statute for an income tax that protects the working poor."

He believes the tax cap might appeal to conservatives who oppose tax rates that escalate as an individual's income grows higher. Fields believes a traditional personal income tax which stairsteps into higher brackets and rising tax bills could not win approval in the Alaska Legislature.

In addition, capping the annual tax at no more than the PFD helps more than just higher-income people, he said. "We

want middle-income people to live in Alaska."

Fields estimates the tax could raise more than \$200 million a year, assuming a dividend similar to the average of the past 10 years of about \$1,300 after excluding the 2022 election-year

oversize payment of \$3,284.

Though \$200 million would be far less than other income and sales taxes proposed in the Legislature over the years, it would be sufficient to cover the increase in state funding to public schools under consideration

by lawmakers this year.

Fields introduced House Bill 185 on May 3, and it's not going anywhere in the final week of this year's legislative session. But he hopes it will get considered next year when legislators return to the Capitol, still

focused on a sustainable fiscal plan for the state and new revenues to pay for schools, public services and the annual PFD.

The bill joins a list of proposals to help close Alaska's long-term

Continued on page 9

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Obituary

Charter boat operator Bob Farrell dies at 79

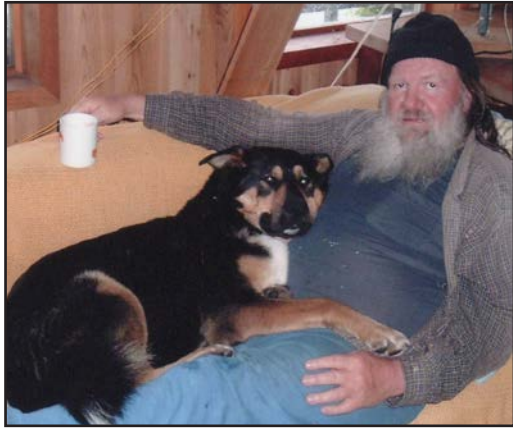
Robert Paul "Bob" Farrell, 79, of Wrangell, passed away on March 21 in his home.

He will be buried at Sitka National Cemetery on Thursday, May 11.

Bob was born in Boston to Anna Elizabeth McGuigan and John Francis Farrell on May 18, 1943. He went to high school at Needham High School, Massachusetts, and graduated in 1961. He joined the Army on July 22, 1964, and served in Vietnam during war. He was honorably discharged on July 21, 1970.

Bob went on to earn a certificate in electronics from the Northeast Institute of Industrial Technology. He worked for the state of Alaska as a computer operations supervisor and later ran his own charter boat, the Hattie, out of Juneau and Wrangell.

He first developed a love for the outdoors as a child. He loved camping and spent many hours fishing from his father's boat on the Charles River and in Boston Harbor. "His sense of adventure combined with anything outdoorsy made Alaska a natural choice," his family wrote. "He lived in Wrangell and Southeast Alaska for over 50 years and loved it here so much he never wanted to return to



ROBERT PAUL "BOB" FARRELL

the Lower 48."

He is survived by his sister, Jean Stevens, of Dennis, Massachusetts; nephews Thomas Stevens, of Florida, and Andrew Farrell, of New Hampshire; and nieces Susan (Stevens) Tibbetts, of Massachusetts, and Laurie (Farrell) Brown, also of Massachusetts.

Donations may be made to the American Legion, P.O. Box 1019, Wrangell, AK 99929.

Legislature approves new program for quality testing of in-state lumber

Alaska Beacon

The Legislature has passed and is sending to the governor a bill intended to reduce the cost of Alaska-made lumber for housing projects.

After it is signed into law by Gov. Mike Dunleavy, the legislation would set up an in-state quality testing system for lumber produced by Alaska sawmills. Currently, that lumber must be tested and graded by a national standards organization, and bringing an outside grader to Alaska adds significant costs, state forester Helge Eng said last fall.

The state House overwhelmingly approved Senate Bill 87, sponsored by Sen. Jesse Bjorkman, of Nikiski, on May 1. The Senate passed the measure without opposition on April 26.

Under the legislation, the University of Alaska Fairbanks would hire a teacher who would train sawmill operators to self-test their wood. Those wood products

would be restricted for use in single-family homes, duplexes or triplexes. An independent building inspector would verify the quality of the lumber.

"Locally milled dimensional lumber that conforms" to state standards "could be sold directly to the end user or a contractor for use in residential structures," Bjorkman explained in a sponsor statement.

The quality-testing training program would be available at no cost to individuals and sawmill operators. The Department of Natural Resources estimates it will cost the state \$221,000 per year to run the program.

The legislation was backed by loggers and environmental groups, with letters of support from the Nature Conservancy, Alaska State Home Building Association and several small sawmills.

The Alaska Beacon is an independent, donor-funded news organization. Alaskabeacon.com.

E-cigarette tax legislation caught up in cloud of questions; snuffed out until next year

By LARRY PERSILY
Sentinel writer

Legislation to impose a state tax on e-cigarettes and vaping devices appears headed to next year's legislative work list.

Lawmakers raised multiple questions about the bills at two committee hearings last week, and the Legislature faces a May 17 adjournment deadline. Bills not acted on by then return for consideration next year.

The legislation was heard in the Senate Finance Committee and House Health and Social Services Committee, both on May 4, with bill sponsors fielding multiple questions about penalties for underage use, the tax burden on consumers and the tax filing requirements on retailers.

Senate President Gary Stevens, sponsoring the legisla-

tion for the third time, told Finance Committee members, "This bill is about protecting our children from becoming addicted to nicotine." He said manufacturers promote e-cigarettes and vape sticks as "fashionable" alternatives to tobacco.

Juneau Rep. Sara Hannan, who, like Stevens, has introduced the bill multiple times in her career, told the House committee that the tax and a lower age limit are "about restricting the sale to young people."

The tax would be 25% on the retail price of the products, adding about \$2 or \$3 to the cost of a \$10 or \$15 e-cigarette, Joe Darnell, chief investigator with the tobacco section at the Department of Health, told the House committee.

A single vape stick has about the same amount of nicotine as a pack of cigarettes, which is taxed by the state at \$2, Tim Lamkin, staff to Stevens, testified at the

Senate Finance Committee.

The tax would raise about \$3.3 million a year. Currently, Alaska taxes cigarettes, cigars and loose tobacco, but not vape products.

The legislation also would raise the minimum age to purchase or possess vape products to 21 years old, the same as tobacco products under Alaska law and the same as federal law for vape sticks and e-cigarettes.

While none of the committee members disagreed with the goal of deterring younger Alaskans from taking up a nicotine habit, several questioned whether the legislation would work.

Health and Social Services Chair Rep. Mike Prax, R-North Pole, questioned whether imposing a tax would create an underground market for untaxed vaping devices.

Committee member Rep. Jesse Sumner, R-Wasilla, said the tax would be "a burden on the poor-

est members of our society."

Others questioned the provision for a maximum fine of \$150 for underage possession.

Representatives of several retail businesses phoned in to testify against the legislation in both committees, specifically adding a new retail tax.

"I think you're going after the wrong area," Minneapolis-based Joe O'Connor, director of tobacco and alcohol sales at Holiday Stationstores, which operates gas stations and convenience stores in Alaska, testified at Senate Finance. "Don't penalize (local) retailers," he said. Rather, target sales by online merchants.

Stevens' bill would ban online sales to individuals.

Several retailers in Alaska told legislators of the burden of collecting the tax and filling out new a form covering only vape products. The state collects its tobacco tax from wholesalers, not retailers.

Others called in to oppose the new tax, saying it would penalize Alaskans who are using vape products in an attempt to quit tobacco.

Several school administrators called in to testify in support of the legislation, including Shawn Arnold, principal at Juneau's Thunder Mountain High School, who told Senate Finance Committee members that 75% of the school's major discipline cases this year were vaping related.

Wrangell is having less of a problem than other Southeast Alaska school districts, Bob Burkhart, the high school principal, said in an interview last week.

"We aren't seeing it at the same level as other schools," he said, praising students who know it's not a good habit to start.

Vaping, same as smoking, is not allowed on school grounds in Wrangell.

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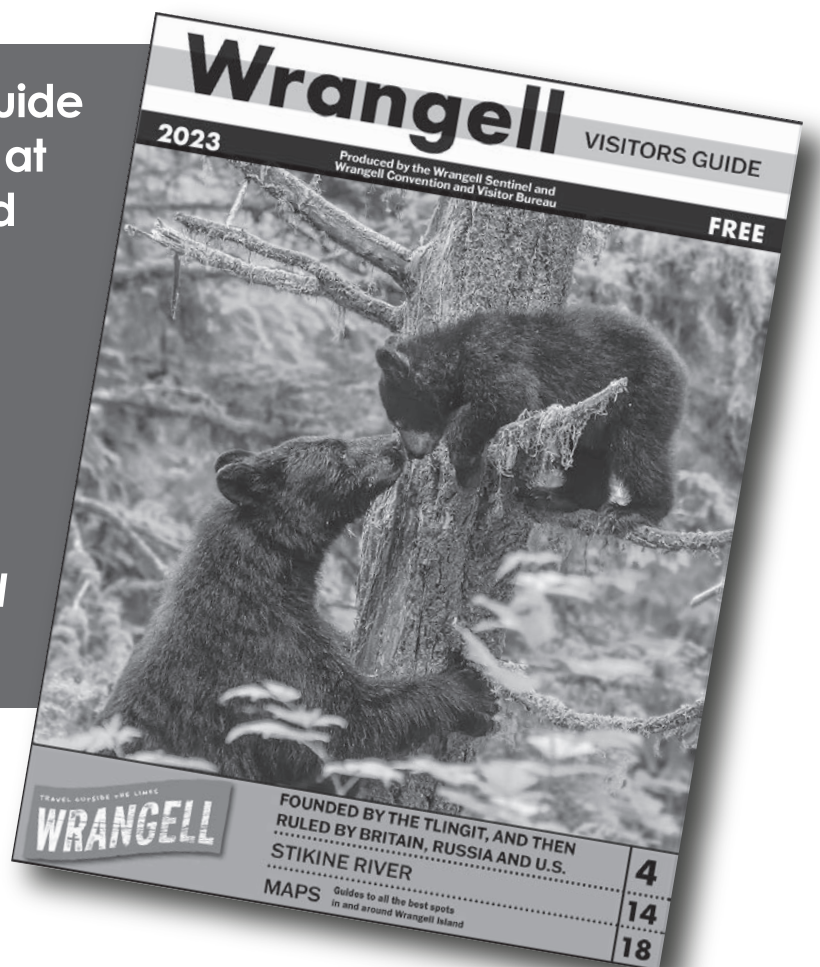
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Legislature extends Medicaid coverage to aid new mothers

By SEAN MAGUIRE
Anchorage Daily News

The Legislature passed a bill Friday extending Medicaid coverage from two months to 12 months for a couple thousand new mothers a year.

Senate Bill 58, proposed by Gov. Mike Dunleavy, is intended to prevent gaps in health care coverage and to address the state's high and rising maternal mortality rate.

State Department of Health officials told lawmakers that 51% of births in Alaska are covered by Medicaid; those new mothers would benefit from the legislation.

The Senate passed the final bill 19-1 on Friday. The House passed the legislation five days earlier on a 35-3 tally. The only no votes in the House and Senate came from two Kenai Peninsula and two Matanuska-Susitna Borough Republicans.

Sen. Donny Olson, of rural Golovin, said in April that extending Medicaid coverage for new mothers was about critical health care, particularly in rural Alaska. Dr. Anne Zink, the state's

chief medical officer, told lawmakers that rural Alaska and minorities are overly represented in state statistics for maternal mortality rates.

Currently, the state provides Medicaid coverage for mothers who are within 200% of the federal poverty line. Freshman Rep. Will Stapp, a Fairbanks Republican, successfully introduced an amendment to cover recipients who earn up to 225%, which was estimated to increase the number of mothers eligible for coverage by 450, to more than 2,000 per year.

"I believe that this bill is one of the most valuable and impactful things we can do for pregnant moms in this state," Stapp said on the House floor last week.

Congress passed legislation earlier in the year that allowed states to permanently extend Medicaid coverage for new mothers to a full year. More than 30 states have since extended postpartum Medicaid coverage.

The extended coverage is estimated to cost the state of Alaska \$4 million per year, and will start being available July 1 next year.

Lawsuit over food stamp delays on hold as state tries to improve

By SEAN MAGUIRE
Anchorage Daily News

Alaskans affected by monthslong food stamp delays have agreed to pause their class-action lawsuit against the state, with the Department of Health pledging to clear 50% of the backlog by mid-October.

The lawsuit was filed in January on behalf of thousands of Alaskans who had waited months to receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, also known as food stamps. Under federal law, states must provide food stamps to eligible applicants no later than 30 days after an application is made.

The state met with attorneys for the 10 plaintiffs last month and reached an agreement to stay the federal lawsuit until Oct. 31. The agreement states that pausing the lawsuit would be "the most efficient and quickest path" to providing relief.

Both parties filed a joint 11-page agreement on May 2 before federal Judge Sharon Gleason, which laid out the benchmarks the state pledged to meet to clear the backlog:

- The Department of Health agreed to clear at least 50% of the current backlog

by Oct. 20. At the end of April, the agency reported a backlog of 10,598 initial applications and recertification requests.

- The department pledged to double the amount of time food stamp recipients are eligible for benefits from six months to one year. Vulnerable recipients could get food stamps for two years, up from 12 months.

- The state pledged to get adequate staffing in place to process applications in a timely manner, and has entered negotiations with 75 contract workers who would assist taking calls at the state's virtual call center, which would resume processing food stamp applications.

Nick Feronti, a Northern Justice Project attorney representing the Alaskans waiting for food aid, said in an interview May 3 that the agreement was "a good result" for the thousands of Alaskans waiting for relief. If the state did not meet its benchmarks, the case would proceed, he said.

The federal government issued a stern warning in March that penalties could be imposed on the state without prompt action to clear the food stamp backlog. State officials have attributed delays to staff shortages and a 2021 cyberattack that disrupted online services for months.

Public calling in to testify in Legislature overwhelm Capitol phone lines

By JAMES BROOKS
Alaska Beacon

The Alaska Legislature is changing some procedures after Capitol phone lines became overloaded by public testimony for a record fifth time this year.

The Capitol's phones reached capacity on May 2, during a hearing about a bill that intends to repeal the state's new ranked-choice voting law. The phone lines have filled more times this year than in the past six years combined, legislative statistics indicate.

Overall call volume hasn't changed significantly from past years, but Alaskans' habits have: Members of the public are now much more likely to call from home, rather than one of the legislative information offices scattered across the state.

The Legislature operates a network of 22 offices across the state (including Wrangell). In addition to offering a phone system for public testimony, the offices provide resources for Alaskans interested in following the legislative process.

That pattern, plus a series of high-interest legislative proposals, have repeatedly filled the Legisla-

ture's 90 public phone lines.

Homer Rep. Sarah Vance said that even her father couldn't make it into the queue for one meeting.

"He's like, 'I tried, and I tried' (to call in)," she said. "I've had numerous people reach out to me, I've had emails and texts, and they keep trying and trying."

On April 21, with several committees simultaneously taking public testimony, the phone lines were so clogged that the Legislature's own attorneys couldn't connect to a House Judiciary Committee that Vance was leading.

"We couldn't get our drafter on the line to answer technical questions," she said. "I was like, 'What do you mean, you can't get the drafter on?'"

That tie-up was unusual in that it was caused by multiple hearings taking testimony at the same time.

Four other times, the lines have been filled by individual controversial bills: House Bill 65, which would increase the state's funding formula for public schools, on March 21; House Bill 105, which as originally written would have restricted the rights of transgender students, on March 30 and April 13; and House Bill 4 on elections, on May 2.

Public testimony is a regular part of the legislative process, taking place in each committee that hears a proposed bill. Members of the public call in or show up in person to voice their opinion about the proposal and any changes made by legislators along the way.

"Something tells me when you put bills on social issues ... you can expect people to come out and be heard," said House Minority Leader Calvin Schrage, of Anchorage.

If there's a silver lining to the phone problem, said Nikiski Rep. Justin Ruffridge, it's that it shows Alaskans are involved with the Legislature. Despite that, it's still a problem, he said.

"They took the time out of their day to try to be heard for two minutes or three minutes, and if you're not even able to get in the queue because the phone system is down, I think you lose even more trust in your elected officials, in the

government process," he said.

To partially fix the problem, the Legislature has set up a dedicated phone line for staff and subject-matter experts who call into committee meetings.

The Capitol's nonpartisan administrative staff are also encouraging members of the public to testify from legislative information offices if they live in a city near one.

The Legislature's phone system was originally designed to accommodate people who live away from major cities. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, patterns changed and more people called in rather than testify from a legislative office in their community.

On May 2, as members of the public waited to testify on the bill that would repeal ranked-choice voting in the state, 97 of 112 callers waiting in the queue were from communities with a legislative office, said Legislative Affairs Agency Director Jessica Geary.

Rep. CJ McCormick, D-Bethel, represents a rural district in Southwest Alaska and said he's been frustrated by the capacity issues. Most of his constituents can't reach the legislative office in Bethel and need the ability to call in.

"I think my district is pretty significantly disadvantaged with public testimony," he said.

Vance said there are things legislators can do themselves to fix the problem. Committee chairs can schedule public testimony sessions at different times so multiple committees aren't trying to use the phone lines at the same time.

Public testimony on contentious bills could be divided by region. The House Finance Committee, for example, sets specific times for testimony from different parts of the state.

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Food stamp delays hit hardest in rural Alaska villages

By MARK THIESSEN, BECKY BOHRER
Associated Press

Thousands of Alaskans who depend on government assistance have waited months for food stamp benefits, exacerbating a long-standing hunger crisis worsened by the pandemic, inflation and the remnants of a typhoon that wiped out stockpiles of fish and fishing equipment in Western Alaska.

The backlog, which began last August, is especially concerning in a state where communities in far-flung areas, including Alaska Native villages, are often not connected by roads. They must have food shipped in by barge or airplane, making the cost of even basic goods exorbitant. Around 13% of the state's roughly 735,000 residents received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits — or SNAP — in July, before the troubles began.

"People are struggling and having to make choices of getting food or getting heating fuel," said Daisy Lockwood Katchek, city administrator in Stebbins, a Native village of 634 people, more than 400 miles northwest of Anchorage.

Faced with food shortages and rampant inflation, the city recently used \$38,000 in funds raised for a children's spring carnival to buy residents basic supplies. The community on Alaska's western coast is also reeling from the remnants of a typhoon that destroyed a critical stockpile of fish and fishing boats at the same time problems with the food stamp program were emerging.

"My people are suffering first hand," said Katchek.

Alaska lawmakers have responded to the state's sluggish response, as lawsuits have alleged failures in the state's administration of the food stamps and a program that provides aid to low-income Alaskans who are blind, elderly or have disabilities.

Gov. Mike Dunleavy authorized \$1.7 million to provide relief to communities. Lawmakers approved emergency funding to hire staff to handle the crush of cases as food banks have reported the highest level of demand they have seen.

"We know a lot of people that are not eating multiple meals a day; they've drawn down to maybe a single meal," said Anthony Reinert, director of programs at the Food Bank of Alaska. There



AP PHOTO/MARK THIESSEN

Stephanie Duboc of Eagle River shops at the Chugiak-Eagle River Food Pantry inside a Presbyterian church in Eagle River on April 21. Like thousands of other Alaskans, Duboc, a volunteer at the pantry, didn't receive her food stamp benefits for months, prompting increased demand at food pantries and food banks across Alaska.

has always "been a baseline of hunger in Alaska, but it's spread and expanded pretty significantly in the last six months."

The hunger crisis in Alaska stems from a storm of cascading events, compounded by staffing and technology issues within the state health department.

During the pandemic, the regular renewal process for SNAP benefits — a federal program administered by states — was suspended. Problems emerged after the state ended its public health emergency last July and recertification requirements for SNAP were reinstated, resulting in a flood of applications.

A cyberattack that targeted the state health department in 2021 complicated Alaska's ability to process the applications, said Heidi Hedberg, who was appointed health commissioner late last year. Employees who were supposed to upgrade key department computer systems were pulled away to address the attack, leaving the upgrade work undone. However, 100 positions that were set to be eliminated due to anticipated efficiencies with the upgrade nonethe-

less were still cut, Hedberg said.

With fewer staff and other problems, by January the backlog of applicants seeking to renew food assistance benefits had reached a high of 9,104. Officials hope to clear the recertification backlog this spring and turn their attention to thousands of new applications, according to the department.

"This is not how SNAP systems are supposed to work, period," said Nick Feronti, an attorney representing Alaskans who are suing over delays and other concerns with the food stamp program.

Stephanie Duboc is still waiting for assistance after submitting her application in December. She volunteers at the Chugiak-Eagle River Food Pantry in suburban Anchorage, and said the food she receives from the pantry is essential.

Among those suing is Rose Carney, 68, who receives \$172 a month in assistance.

Carney said she received a letter in September saying her benefits had been renewed — but a month later, got another letter saying her application was due the next day. She filled it out but

didn't start receiving benefits until last month after contacting a lawyer, she said. Meanwhile, she added water to stretch bean soup and visited a church food pantry to get by.

"I was really upset because that was like income that I was depending on, even though it was just food stamps," said Carney.

Feronti, her attorney, has 10 clients seeking class-action status, but the case has been on hold as the parties work toward a possible resolution that could compel long-term changes.

The National Center for Law and Economic Justice, also involved in the case, has filed a similar lawsuit in Missouri, but Alaska's situation is "in the extreme," said Saima Akhtar, an attorney with the center.

The \$1.7 million allocated by Dunleavy in February was for the food banks to address urgent needs, including the bulk purchases of goods and distribution of cash cards so people in rural communities could buy groceries on their own and support local stores.

Reinert, with the food bank, said about \$800,000 was used to buy staples like oatmeal, pasta, beans, canned fruit and shelf-stable cheese at cheaper prices in Washington state. The goods were then shipped to Alaska for distribution.

Those supplies are beginning to reach the most needy communities, where the cost of groceries in the store are astronomically high due to the logistics of getting them there.

In Bethel, a hub community in southwest Alaska, the Bethel Community Services Foundation provides food to about 350 households a month — nearly six times as many as before the pandemic. Milk at the store costs about \$12.50 a gallon, while a 20-pound bag of rice is \$62.49 and a 40-pound bag of a discount brand of dog food is \$82.49, said Carey Atchak, the foundation's food security coordinator.

That's cheap compared to the Yup'ik village of Kwethluk, a 12-mile flight from Bethel, where an 18-pack of eggs can cost almost \$17 and a double pack of peanut butter goes for \$25.69.

State sued by civil rights firm over delays in public assistance benefits

By SEAN MAGUIRE
Anchorage Daily News

JUNEAU — An Anchorage civil rights law firm has filed a class-action lawsuit against the state Department of Health over delays in processing appli-

cations for a program that provides assistance for thousands of vulnerable Alaskans.

The state's adult public assistance program pays an average of \$308.20 per month, and is often supplemented by federal assistance programs, according

to the Department of Health. During the past fiscal year, an average of 15,385 Alaskans received the monthly aid, alongside a separate transition program.

In Wrangell, the program paid out benefits to an average

57 individuals a month last year, totaling just over \$200,000.

State officials have been scrambling for months to clear a backlog of applications for state assistance, including thousands of Alaskans who have been waiting months for food stamp

benefits.

To be eligible for the adult public assistance program, applicants must be blind, disabled or aged 65 or older. There is also a low-income threshold to receive assistance: Monthly income for an individual must be below \$1,276 per month, and below \$1,899 for a couple. Individual applicants must have less than \$2,000 in assets, excluding a home and a car. For couples, the asset limit is \$3,000.

The lawsuit, filed in Anchorage Superior Court on April 17 by the Northern Justice Project, asserts that the Department of Health violated state law by not processing a "vast majority" of applications within the 30-day limit set out in state regulations. State statute says that applications must be processed "promptly."

The lawsuit was filed on behalf of thousands of low-income Alaskans who have experienced application delays.

At least 8,532 Alaskans had applied for adult public assistance between July 1 of last year and April 3 of this year. The state Division of Public Assistance's data — included in court documents — showed that in 2020, 81.4% of applications for adult public assistance were being processed within 30 days. By March of this year, that had dropped to 37.1%.

The Northern Justice Project is involved in the separate lawsuit in federal court challenging the food stamps delays.

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Legislation would allow faster decisions on state timber sales

By JAMES BROOKS
Alaska Beacon

A bill advancing in the Alaska Legislature would dramatically shorten the time needed to authorize logging of some state-owned lands, shrinking approval time from years to days in the most extreme cases.

Proponents say the bill will alleviate fire danger and revitalize the state's dwindling logging industry by expanding the amount of timber that can be sold from public land, but legislative and public critics contend that the bill's lack of specificity gives the commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources almost unlimited discretion to decide what forests can be speedily sold and cut.

House Bill 104, from Republican Rep. Mike Cronk, passed the House in a 32-5 bipartisan vote on April 20 and received its first Senate committee hearing on April 24. Cronk represents a large Interior district that

stretches from the Canadian border across the state almost to the Bering Sea coast.

The normal process for allowing loggers onto state-owned land can take four years or more from the time a forest is identified for cutting.

If passed by the Legislature and approved by Gov. Mike Dunleavy, HB 104 would allow the state to more quickly sell forests that are threatened by fire, or need to be cleared for development, or have been killed by insects, disease or previous fires.

The change is vital, Cronk said, for allowing the speedy removal of trees killed by spruce beetles before they become a fire danger. Those insects have devastated Southcentral Alaska forests.

The bill could allow the state to sell timber in the path of a wildfire, allowing loggers to cut trees before they burn. And if used to allow logging of commercially valuable timber, it could revitalize the state's logging industry, Cronk and other supporters said.

Faster approval of timber sales has prompted concerns about what might happen if the state approves logging in places where local residents want to keep their trees.

In Whale Pass, on Prince of Wales Island, residents are organizing to oppose a 292-acre state timber sale expected to log a hillside within 200 feet of some homes there.

Katie Rooks, a Prince of Wales Island resident who works for the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, testified before the Senate Resources Committee on April 24 that what's happening in Whale Pass could soon happen elsewhere if HB 104 becomes law.

"This is a mistake. This is a bad bill, and the folks on Prince of Wales can tell you how bad it would be," she said.

Anchorage Democratic Sen. Bill Wielechowski, a member of the committee, said that without firm definitions of what meets the criteria for a fast timber sale, a commis-

sioner and state forestry officials could allow much broader sales than legislators intend.

"This looks like it's giving the commissioner carte blanche," Wielechowski said.

Eng disagreed in part.

"In the extreme, any area could be deemed to be at risk, but I believe the theme is that professional experts ... will single out the area that's at extreme risk and will judiciously apply this criteria," he said.

Wielechowski said after the meeting that he thinks the bill needs more work and that the speed with which the House passed the bill means legislators there may not have thought out its implications.

Legislative work must end by the adjournment deadline of May 17, but bills that fail to pass can be held over to next year's session.

The Alaska Beacon is an independent, donor-funded news organization. Alaskabeacon.com.

Senators acknowledge change in public employee retirement plan needs more time

By JAMES BROOKS
Alaska Beacon

As public employees rallied in front of the Alaska Capitol last week, demanding reinstatement of a pension system the Legislature abolished 18 years ago, leading members of the state Senate said their request was unlikely to be fulfilled this year.

Members of the 17-member bipartisan Senate majority said at the start of this year's legislative session that a bill intended to improve recruitment and retention of state employees was a priority. But with only a week left in the regular legislative session, Senate President Gary Stevens said a pension bill is now

expected to become law no sooner than next year.

"We started the year hoping that we could get this through this year, but I think the reality has sort of set in to realize that there's a lot of work yet to do," the Kodiak Republican said.

Alaska currently offers a 401(k)-style defined-contribution retirement system, and the Senate's preferred pension bill, Senate Bill 88, would return the state to a defined-benefit retirement system, commonly known as a pension.

Under a defined-benefit plan, state, municipal and school district employees could qualify for a pension based on their years of service and average salary. Em-

ployees and employers would contribute to the plan, with the employer taking on the investment risk.

Under the state's defined-contribution plan, employee and employer contributions are invested and held for the employee to withdraw at their choosing. The investment risk falls entirely to the individual.

The return to a pension system still has to overcome the doubts of some senators as well as lawmakers in the House and Gov. Mike Dunleavy before becoming law, and it isn't guaranteed that it will pass next year, either.

"Some of us haven't concluded that a complete change is the solution," said Sitka Sen.

Bert Stedman and one of the majority's leading skeptics.

On May 2, the same day as the rally in front of the Capitol, SB 88 received its first hearings in the Senate Finance Committee, where Stedman sits as co-chair.

Sen. Cathy Giessel, the bill's lead sponsor, pointed out a news story when talking about the need for a return to a traditional pension plan. The state Office of Public Advocacy had announced that it could no longer provide public guardians for disabled or handicapped Alaskans.

"We have a problem: It's difficult to retain. It's difficult to recruit using a defined contribution system," she said.

"Certainly the pension is-

sue — going back to a defined benefit — is not the single solution, but it's certainly a big piece," Giessel said.

Dan Doonan, executive director of the National Institute on Retirement Security, told members of the Senate Finance Committee that a study examining Alaska's teacher retention problems found that teachers were more likely to quit if they had the new 401(k)-style retirement system than if they had the old pension-style system.

"The turnover rates here are fairly high compared with other states and what used to be the case with the (defined-benefit) plan," he said.

Continued on page 16



CONGRATULATE YOUR GRADUATES!

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WRANGELL SENTINEL

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Police report

Monday, May 1
 Agency assist: Ambulance.
 Hazardous play.
 Report of suspicion of driving under the influence: Unfounded.

Tuesday, May 2
 Agency assist: Ambulance.
 Noise complaint.

Wednesday, May 3
 Criminal mischief.
 Vacation check.

Thursday, May 4
 Agency assist: Ambulance.

Friday, May 5
 Abandoned vehicles.
 Violation of domestic violence order.

Saturday, May 6
 Perjury.
 Courtesy transport.

Arrest for violating a domestic violence order and violating conditions of release.
 Agency assist: Fire department.
 Inmate medical.
 Agency assist: U.S. Forest Service citations issued for minor consumption of alcohol.

Sunday, May 7
 Noise disturbance.
 Fire alarm: Testing system.
 Fire alarm: System malfunction.
 Agency assist: Alarm.
 Agency assist: Alaska State Troopers.
 Agency assist: U.S. Forest Service.
 Citizen assist: Dog trap loaned out.
 During this reporting period there were four subpoenas served and seven agency assists for the Hoonah Police Department.

Legislation would require parental approval of all student lesson plans

By JAMES BROOKS
Alaska Beacon

Parents of Alaska public school students would be required to OK every lesson taught by their child's teacher under newly revised legislation approved by the House Education Committee, but which is not expected to pass the Legislature this year.

Without permission, the student would be held out of field trips, extracurricular activities, and even basic lessons on algebra, biology and history.

The revised bill also requires school districts to make single-person restrooms available to students.

An earlier version of the bill, proposed by Gov. Mike Dunleavy, would have prohibited transgender students from using their preferred bathroom if it didn't match their "biological sex." That idea was removed by the committee after hours of public testimony that saw a majority of speakers opposing the idea.

Under the new version, no one would be required to use a particular restroom.

An additional provision in the rewritten bill requires parents to

give school districts "a list of all the names and pronouns" that can be used to refer to a student. This would prevent a transgender student from using a different name without their parent's knowledge and permission.

The bill goes next to the House Judiciary Committee, and would still need to pass the full House and Senate. The Senate has expressed no interest in taking up House Republicans' conservative social agenda.

The new language advanced on a 4-3 vote after Education Committee members on April 28 amended House Bill 105, which originally stated that parents would have to opt their children into sex-education classes rather than opt-out. The governor's office labeled the measure a "parental rights" bill, and its details resembled those debated in majority-Republican states across the country.

Committee Co-chair Rep. Justin Ruffridge, R-Soldotna, revised the bill to focus on curriculum after hearing hours of public testimony, mostly against the original version.

Ruffridge said he envisions parents being presented with a syllabus and being asked to

approve it. "Here's the plan for the next three or four months, here's the books we're going to read and the categories we're going to discuss. Please let me know if this sounds good to you," he said, describing a hypothetical process. "And then if there's any changes to that ... a permission slip goes out."

"It's just not practical," said Lon Garrison, director of the Association of Alaska School Boards.

He said it would create a huge administrative burden for school administrators and raises questions about what will happen to students whose parents opt them out of lessons.

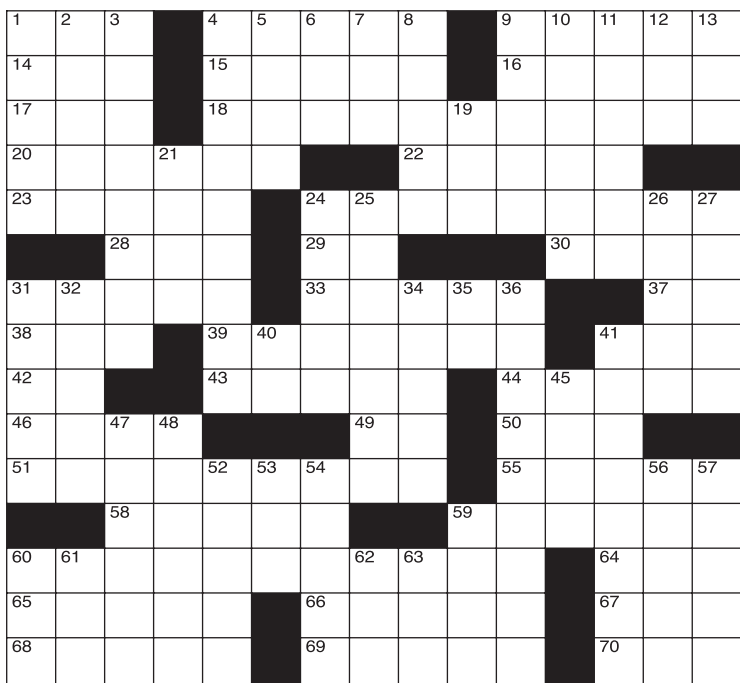
Then, there's the practical considerations — requiring parental approval for any changes would prevent teachers from incorporating new material during the school year.

"Right now, the curriculum is approved by the school board; it's available for everybody to review. But there's also additional materials that teachers can bring in as long as it's aligned with the curriculum. And so every time that would happen, theoretically, if you read this bill, you'd have to get

Continued on page 15

Crossword

Answers on Page 12



CLUES ACROSS

- 1. Midway between south and southeast
- 4. Fathers
- 9. Wine grape
- 14. Al Bundy's wife
- 15. Organic compound
- 16. Venezuelan state
- 17. Interest term
- 18. Experts
- 20. Central cores of stems
- 22. Smooth and glossy
- 23. One-time S. Korean city
- 24. One from Damascus
- 28. Short message at the end of an email
- 29. It cools your home
- 30. Oh, God!
- 31. Intestinal pouches
- 33. Men
- 37. Popular English soccer team (abbr.)
- 38. Former CIA
- 39. Arrange in steps
- 41. A baglike structure in a plant or animal
- 42. The Great Lake State
- 43. Dog-__: to mark a page
- 44. Stop moving
- 46. Ancient Dead Sea region
- 49. Of I
- 50. Clerical vestment
- 51. Songs sung to a lover
- 55. Charges
- 58. Popular design program manufacturer
- 59. Where to park a boat
- 60. One who values reason
- 64. Slang for cigarette
- 65. Sailboats
- 66. Actress Zellweger
- 67. Screen material
- 68. Country music legend Haggard
- 69. Puts together in time
- 70. When you hope to arrive

CLUES DOWN

- 1. An involuntary and abnormal muscular contraction
- 2. Philly's rail service
- 3. Leaves a place
- 4. No longer be a part in
- 5. Guitar players use them
- 6. Cease to exist
- 7. General's assistant (abbr.)
- 8. Shaking of the earth
- 9. Strong winds
- 10. For each one
- 11. A bog
- 12. The creation of beautiful or significant things
- 13. Affirmative
- 19. Pie ___ mode
- 21. Nonclerical
- 24. Inspirational football player Hamlin
- 25. Learning environment
- 26. Khoikhoi peoples
- 27. Bring out or develop
- 31. Shows up
- 32. Theatrical device
- 34. Loads
- 35. Popular Hollywood alien
- 36. Distinguishes
- 40. College dorm worker
- 41. Secondary or explanatory title
- 45. Resembling wings
- 47. One who delivers a speech
- 48. In the middle
- 52. Loop with a running knot
- 53. Airborne (abbr.)
- 54. Beloveds
- 56. Ordain
- 57. Breed of small cattle
- 59. Very small period of time (abbr.)
- 60. Revolutions per minute
- 61. They ___
- 62. Longtime ESPN anchor Bob
- 63. A place to stay

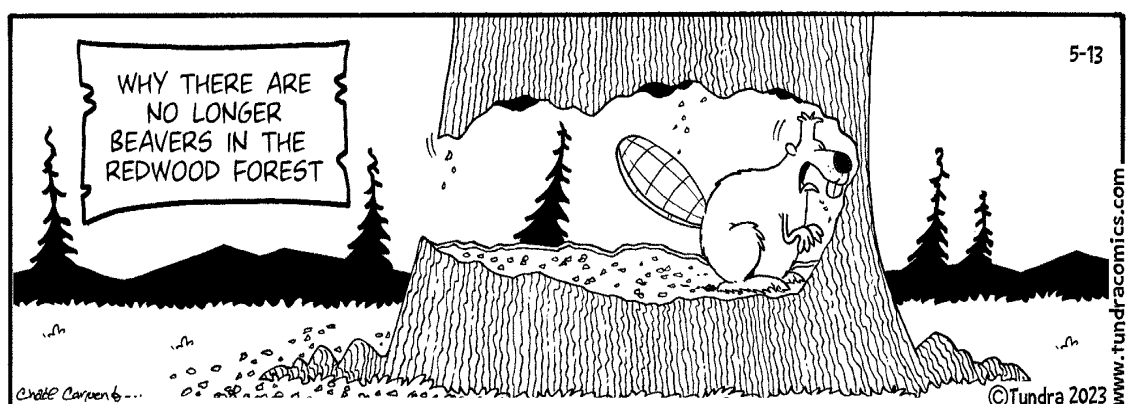
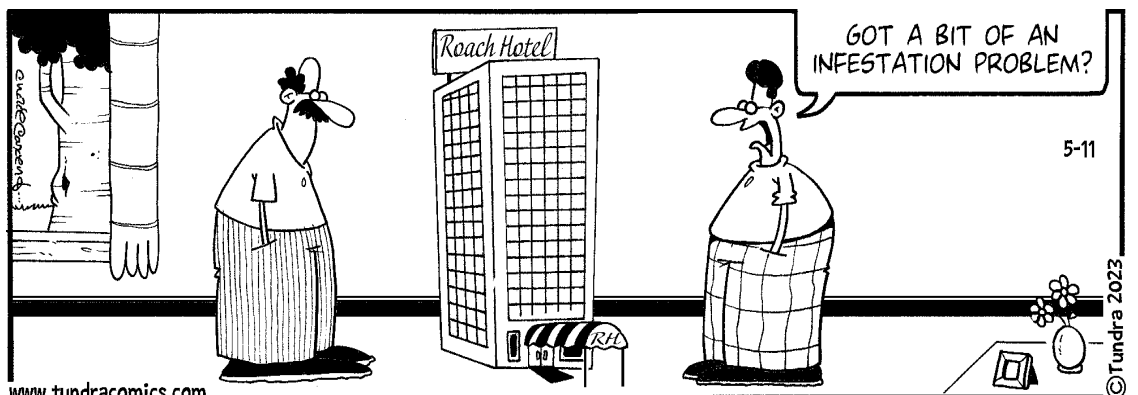
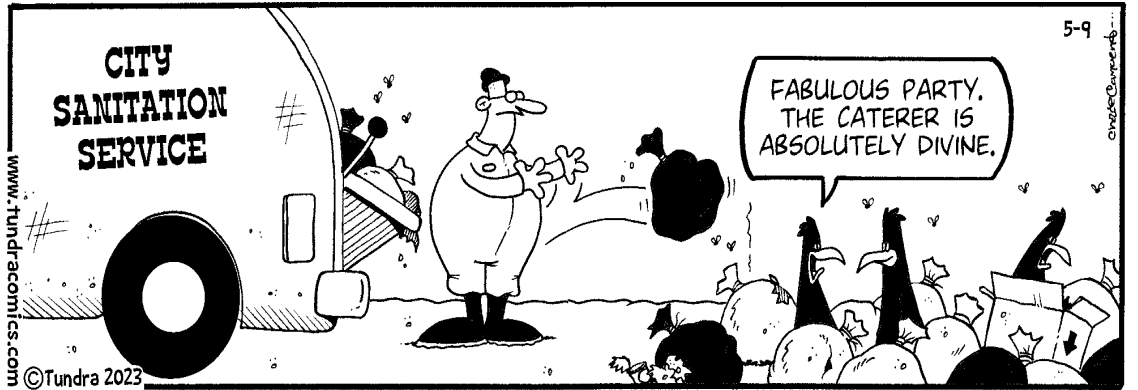
Ritter's River

by Marc Lutz



Tundra

by Chad Carpenter



Lesson plans

Continued from page 14

permission to do that," he said.

On the seven-member Education Committee, four Republicans voted for the bill. The committee's two Democrats and one independent voted against it.

Committee member Rep. Mike Prax, a North Pole Republican, said he thinks it was a mistake for states to mandate school attendance, a practice

that began with Massachusetts in 1853. "That was the original mistake," he said in committee.

"We should have asked ourselves: What crime did parents commit by allowing their children to turn 7, that they have to be sent to school?" Prax said.

Democratic Rep. CJ McCormick, of Bethel, the youngest member of the Legislature, grew passionate as he spoke against the bill. He graduated from

high school in 2015 and said he ran for office to make life easier for kids like him. The House bill does the opposite, he said.

"I feel like this bill strips our state's young people of the ability to make choices for themselves," he said. "It denies them the ability to live with dignity."

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CLASSIFIED

HELP WANTED

Wrangell Public Schools is accepting applications for the following position for the 2022-2023 school year:

- **Custodian:** This is a full-time, year-round classified position with benefits, 7.5 hours per day. Salary placement is on Column B of the Classified Salary Schedule. Job duties include but are not limited to keeping our school complex clean and assisting with setting up rooms for classes, large presentations and business meetings as needed; and assisting with minor repairs. A High School Diploma or equivalent is desired.

Wrangell Public Schools is accepting applications for the following positions for the 2023-2024 school year:

- **Early Childhood Education Teacher:** This is a full-time teaching position working with children with special needs. The position requires an Alaska teaching certificate with appropriate endorsements in Elementary Education.
- **Reading Intervention/Title I Teacher:** This is a full-time teaching position working with students in PK-12 to provide targeted intervention. The position will be based in the elementary school but will also provide support to secondary students. The position requires an Alaska teaching certificate with appropriate endorsements.

We are also accepting applications for the following extracurricular positions for the 2023-2024 school year:

- Baseball Head Coach and Assistant Coach
- Basketball, Boys Assistant Coach
- Class Advisers:
- Freshmen Class
- Sophomore Class
- Senior Class Co-adviser
- Cross Country Running Head Coach
- Softball Head and Assistant Coach
- Volleyball Head and Assistant Coach
- Elementary Student Council Adviser

PUBLIC NOTICE

Alaska Waters, Inc. is making application for a new Brewery License AS 04.11.130 liquor license doing business as Alaska Waters, Inc. located at 5 Front St. Unit 1, Wrangell.

Interested persons should submit written comment to their local governing body, the applicant, and to the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board at 550 West 7th Ave., Suite 1600, Anchorage, AK 99501, or alcohol.licensing@alaska.gov.

Publish May 10, 2023

For more information and a detailed job description, please contact the District Office at 907-874-2347. These positions are open until filled. It is Wrangell Public School District policy to not discriminate based on age, race, color, national origin, sex or disability.

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Two Stikine River properties on King Slough: 200-foot frontage, 6-plus acres, \$80,000; 8-acre

backlot, lots of good access, \$60,000. Willing to finance. Call 907-518-0101.

FREE ADS

Do you have something to sell? Having a garage sale? Looking to buy something? Classified ads for individuals and community groups are free in the Sentinel. Contact Amber at 907-874-2301 or email wrgsent@gmail.com.

NOTICE TO CREDITORS

In the matter of the estate of Robert Paul Farrell, Notice to Creditors is hereby given that Andrew Farrell has been appointed personal representative of the above named estate. Pursuant to Alaska Statute Title 13.16.450, all creditors are hereby notified to present their claims within four months after the date of first publication of this notice or said claims will forever be barred. Claims must be filed with the court (Case No. 1WR-23-00005PR) or be presented to:

Andrew Farrell
8 Sylvan Lane
Sandown, New Hampshire 03873

Publish May 10, 17 and 24, 2023

CITY and BOROUGH OF WRANGELL NOTICE INVITING BIDS

Notice is hereby given that the City and Borough of Wrangell, Alaska, will receive sealed bids for the construction of the **NOLAN CENTER STORAGE BUILDING SETTLEMENT REPAIR** project. WORK consists of installing helical piles to support the building foundation and slab. The Engineer's Estimate for all work is approximately \$100,000.

Sealed bids will be received by the City and Borough of Wrangell, Post Office Box 531, Wrangell, Alaska 99929, or located at the Borough Clerk's Office, 205 Brueger Street, Wrangell, Alaska 99929, until 2 p.m. prevailing time on May 16, 2023, and publicly opened at that time. The Contract Documents are available in electronic format and can be downloaded from the City and Borough of Wrangell website (www.wrangell.com) under the Bids and RFP's section.

The OWNER reserves the right to reject any or all Bids, to waive any informality in a Bid, or to make award as it best serves the interests of the OWNER.

Jeff Good, Borough Manager
City and Borough of Wrangell, Alaska

Publish April 26; May 3 and 10, 2023

CITY and BOROUGH OF WRANGELL NOTICE INVITING BIDS

Notice is hereby given that the City and Borough of Wrangell, Alaska, will receive sealed bids for the construction of the **SWIMMING POOL SIDING REPLACEMENT** project. WORK consists of removing and replacing the exterior siding and column brick facade. The Engineer's Estimate for all work is approximately \$395,000.

Sealed bids will be received by the City and Borough of Wrangell, Post Office Box 531, Wrangell, Alaska 99929, or located at the Borough Clerk's Office, 205 Brueger Street, Wrangell, Alaska 99929, until 2 p.m. prevailing time on May 15, 2023, and publicly opened at that time.

The Contract Documents are available in electronic format and can be downloaded from the City and Borough of Wrangell website (www.wrangell.com) under the Bids and RFPs section.

The OWNER reserves the right to reject any or all Bids, to waive any informality in a Bid, or to make award as it best serves the interests of the OWNER.

Jeff Good, Borough Manager
City and Borough of Wrangell, Alaska

Publish April 26; May 3 and 10, 2023

WRANGELL COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION TRANSPORTATION (WCAT) Notice of Job Openings

Wrangell Cooperative Association Transportation (WCAT) is seeking two road/trail maintenance laborers. Complete job descriptions and applications are available outside the Wrangell Cooperative Association office at 1002 Zimovia Highway. Positions are open until filled.

Contact Lizzy Romane at 907-874-3077 with any questions.

Publish May 10 and 17, 2023.

CITY and BOROUGH OF WRANGELL PUBLIC NOTICE Wrangell Light and Power Annual Diesel Run

Wrangell Municipal Light and Power will be starting our annual Diesel Run to support SEAPA's Tye Lake Maintenance and Transmission Line work. The diesel run is scheduled to start Wednesday, May 31, 2023, at 8 a.m., and is scheduled to end Friday, June 9, 2023, at 8 a.m.

We are asking the community to conserve electricity as much as possible during the annual diesel run.

The Fuel Surcharge that will be included on your bill for the July 2023 billing is for the additional cost to provide power to our customers when using diesel generation. This additional cost is for the power used during the time period of May 31, 2023, to June 9, 2023, at 8 a.m. The fuel surcharge will be reflected on July 2023 utility bill. The cost per KWH (power usage) for the surcharge was calculated to be 3.4 cents per KWH. In addition to the normal July bill, the surcharge (June KWH times 3.4 cents per KWH) will be added. Example: If a customer used 500 KWH in June, they would be billed an additional \$17.00 (500 X .034). The complete Fuel Surcharge calculation is posted at City Hall or can be requested.

Please contact Wrangell Light and Power 907-874-3602 if you have any questions.

Dominique O'Connor, Electric Dispatch Secretary
City and Borough of Wrangell, Alaska

Publish May 10, 17 and 24, 2023

F/V HARMONY

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Great 40' Multi-Gear Boat:
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Longliner, Troll, Cat 3306
Priced to sell. Will consider
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CITY and BOROUGH OF WRANGELL NOTICE OF JOB OPENING Harbor Maintenance/Security

The Wrangell Harbor Department will accept applications for the position of Harbor Maintenance/Security through May 12, 2023, at 5 p.m. This is a permanent position with all City and Borough benefits and is part of the IBEW collective bargaining agreement.

This position has considerable responsibility for operations at Port and Harbor Facilities. The post comes with autonomy, but also the duty to coordinate and cooperate with those outside the Harbor Department.

This position provides daily maintenance of all Port and Harbor Facilities and maintains a preventative maintenance program for all Port and Harbor Facilities. The work is performed under the supervision of the Port & Harbor Director, but considerable leeway is granted for the exercise of independent judgment and initiative. The nature of the work requires that an employee maintain effective working relationships with other city departments and employees, State and Federal officials, business and community organizations and the public. Performs duties as part of the Department of Homeland Security Port Security Plan.

Requires knowledge of marine construction and maintenance operations. Requires basic carpenter skills. Requires boat handling skills. Requires basic computer skills. Requires the ability to weld steel and aluminum, or ability to learn those skills. Requires basic plumbing skills.

A High School Diploma or GED is required. Must have a valid Alaska driver's license, valid TWIC card, and basic First Aid/CPR certification or the ability to obtain all within 6 months.

Applications and job descriptions may be obtained and returned to Wrangell City Hall, 205 Brueger St. (P.O. Box 531), Wrangell, AK 99929 or via email to rmarshall@wrangell.com.

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Jeff Good, Borough Manager
City and Borough of Wrangell, Alaska

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State public guardian agency short-staffed, stops accepting new clients

By IRIS SAMUELS
Anchorage Daily News

A staffing crisis in the state agency that provides guardianship services for some of the most vulnerable Alaskans means it can no longer accept new cases, agency heads said in a letter to the Alaska court system.

The Office of Public Advocacy is required by law to provide guardianship services for adults with severe mental illness, intellectual or developmental disabilities, dementia or traumatic brain injuries, along with young adults transitioning out of the custody of foster care or the juvenile justice system. That means connecting them with basic services they need to survive, including housing and medical care.

But recent turnover among public guardians — whose training and certification process takes at least two years — has led the 17 fully certified public guardians employed by the office to each carry a caseload between of 97 and 100 wards, more than double the standard of 40 wards per guardian recommended by the National Guardianship Association, according to the letter sent April 28 from the Office of Public Advocacy director and deputy director to the Alaska Supreme Court chief

justice and presiding judges. “As we have been alerting the courts for the last several years, the public guardian caseloads have become overwhelming,” wrote Director James Stinson and Deputy Director Beth Goldstein, explaining their decision to cease accepting new cases.

They went on to write that if public guardians are forced to accept additional cases without additional staffing, the “wards and protected persons would only receive the illusion of protections because the Public Guardian cannot carry out the essential tasks to keep them protected.”

Those tasks include obtaining funds, housing, benefits, food and medical treatment for Alaska residents who cannot do so for themselves.

Continuing to accept new cases, they said, would expose the agency, which is part of the Alaska Department of Administration, to “numerous negligence lawsuits” and create the possibility that additional public guardians will leave the agency “because they are petrified of being negligent and costing someone their life because their caseload is unmanageable.”

State law requires public guardians to follow rules adopted by the National Guard-

ianship Association, including a minimum of one visit per month with each ward.

The office “is on the brink of having the entire Public Guardian section implode,” Stinson said in an email. “If I do not take this step, we may be left with no Public Guardian section at all.”

Stinson and Goldstein said in the letter that the staffing shortage is not a result of inadequate funding, but of high turnover.

“The governor and the Legislature have been supportive of additional requests for positions. The issue has been the attrition rate of Certified Public Guardians and the length of time it takes to train and certify a Public Guardian,” Stinson said in an email.

Stinson cited low pay among several factors contributing to turnover in recent years, in addition to high workload, a shrinking pool of interested and experienced applicants, and a lack of growth opportunities in the position.

Staff turnover and recruitment and retention challenges have been cited in recent months as leading to crisis-level challenges in numerous state agencies, including the Public Defender Agency and the state office responsible for handling public assistance.

Seventeen public guardians have re-

signed in the past three years — four in the past year, Stinson said. The staffing reached a breaking point when a public guardian responsible for 85 wards had to take a long-term absence for health reasons, forcing remaining guardians to take on those cases and creating “an untenable staffing situation,” according to the letter.

Stinson and Goldstein said it would likely be nine to 12 months before they would have capacity to take on new cases, as additional guardians become certified.

The agency asked the court in the meantime to consider several interim solutions, including implementing a waitlist, prioritizing new cases on the basis of urgency and need, and appointing private attorneys to serve as temporary guardians, using a separate pool of state funds.

Stinson said the Office of Public Advocacy, in consultation with the governor’s office, is also considering hiring additional employees to fill lower-level positions “that can help take the less complicated, but voluminous, work off the remaining” certified guardians.

Stinson said the agency is committed to keeping all existing clients, which is “already a challenge.”

Environmental group says proposed mine endangers Chilkat River system

By YERETH ROSEN
Alaska Beacon

A pair of connected Southeast Alaska waterways are on the 2023 list of America’s Most Endangered Rivers issued by a national environmental organization.

The Chilkat River and its biggest tributary, the Klehini River, are among the rivers cited as at risk by the organization American Rivers, which issued its annual list of top 10 threatened rivers last month.

The Chilkat and Klehini rivers flow through the Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, which holds the world’s largest congregation of eagles. The rivers

also support salmon runs and a population of bears, and they are important to the traditional culture of the region’s Tlingit people.

But the rivers are threatened by a proposed mine, the Palmer Project, the organization said. The mine site is about 18 miles upstream from the Tlingit village of Klukwan, which is upstream from Haines.

The Palmer Project is a proposed underground copper and zinc mine currently in the exploratory phase. That phase includes digging a mile-long tunnel permitted by the state.

Even in exploration, the mine project threatens the rivers, the report said.

“The excavation will create huge waste storage piles and contaminated wastewater discharges in an area with extremely high levels of sulfide deposits, rainfall, snowfall and seismic activity. The acidic wastewater, contaminated with heavy metals, hydrocarbons from vehicles and drilling muds, and explosive residues, will flow into the nearby creeks and the Chilkat and Klehini rivers. This development is extremely dangerous to the fragile ecosystem of the Chilkat Valley,” the American Rivers report said.

The Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation has issued a wastewater permit to the mine developers for the tunnel, which is planned to run beneath a glacier and be big enough to carry truck traffic.

The Chilkat Indian Village, the local tribal government, and several environmental organizations have challenged that permit. They are pushing for the federal government to intercede to ensure that Clean Water Act standards are met.

The mine is a major threat, the tribe’s president said in a statement.

“The natural riches of these lands and waters have allowed our people not only to survive, but to thrive, for untold generations. Endangering the Chilkat River ecosystem with a hard rock mine will have devastating effects on our tribal people that rely on the Chilkat River and Chilkat Valley as our sustainable food source,” Chilkat Indian Village President Kimberley Strong said in the statement.

The Palmer Project is being developed as a joint venture of Vancouver-based American Pacific Mining and Dowa Metals and Mining of Japan. On its website, American Pacific Mining says the project is in the “advanced exploration” stage. The website characterizes the project as a low-cost, high-margin underground mine “with attractive environmental attributes.”

Other rivers on the endangered list include the Colorado River section flowing through the Grand Canyon, the Ohio River, the Pearl River of Louisiana and Mississippi and the Pacific Northwest’s Snake River.

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PUZZLE SOLUTION

Public employee pensions

Continued from page 13

Dominic Lozano, president of the Alaska Professional Firefighters Association, testified in support of the bill and said it was crafted using ideas from other states, including Wisconsin and North Dakota. “We’ve stolen the best practices from each of them,” he said.

If implemented, Senate Bill 88 would require new employees to participate in the pension plan, while existing employees would be given the choice to stay with the current retirement system or switch to

the new one.

Benefits would be guaranteed: Police, firefighters and other public safety employees would be able to retire at age 50 with 25 years of service (or at age 55 with 20 years), while teachers and other public employees would be allowed to retire at age 60 or with 30 years of service.

If the state’s pension fund begins running below the amount that actuaries believe is needed to pay future benefits, a state board would be able to adjust required con-

tribution rates to make up the gap.

Medical benefits are not included in the legislation, which Giessel and proponents said was a compromise intended to encourage passage of the bill.

The state’s prior pension system was eliminated by the Alaska Legislature in 2005 because of shortfalls in the pension fund.

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