

2004_5_28_VOT_HERE WE GO AGAIN . . . Special session

Voice of the Times

(Published: May 28, 2004)

HERE WE GO AGAIN . . . Special session

THERE IS one thing to be said for a special session of the Legislature. It is focused. There is no time for sideshows. Not too much opportunity for smoke and mirrors. Get it done and go home.

Of course, that's the way Alaska's regular annual legislative sessions should operate, too. Unfortunately, they don't - as witness the recently adjourned bit of business that lasted four months and left a lot of things dangling.

To address some of those, Gov. Frank Murkowski plans to issue a call that will bring the 40 members of the House and 20 members of the Senate back to Juneau in late June.

Too bad. A more disciplined group of lawmakers, willing to set aside partisan games and concentrating on doing what is best for Alaska, should have been able to better serve the state's needs in the course of 120 days - when they had nothing else to do, and the splendid isolation of Juneau in which to do it.

In the course of the coming session, the governor will be laying before the legislators some familiar items, prime among them a hope that a long-term fiscal plan can be adopted.

That may involve a new way for the state to manage the Permanent Fund to ensure annual dividend checks, on which Alaskans have become fully addicted, while providing the state with operating revenues. The most promising new method would be what is called a Percent of Market Value system - which most legislators clearly like, but which was strangled during the last session by political gamesmanship.

Murkowski's effort to get a \$1-a-pack increase in cigarette taxes also was snuffed out during the regular session. The governor indicates he will bring that back for the end-of-June gathering, along with some bond propositions - one of which would be designed to make motorists happy while idling in traffic at Tudor and Lake Otis.

The opportunity to get something done in a special session, something that couldn't be accomplished in the regular session, comes because the legislators are limited in their ability to bounce all over the map. They can only consider measures proposed by the governor. Period.

There have been many special sessions over the years since the first state Legislature met in 1959. Many of them dealt with the need to respond to natural disasters - the Good Friday earthquake of 1964, the Fairbanks flood of 1967 - and other major state crises.

Whether the problems of this year rise to that standard is debatable.

But there is comfort in knowing that session won't last more than a few days - or maybe a week, at the most.