

OUR VIEW

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Special session

Lawmakers have a job to do this week in Juneau

Wally Hickel was in classic form Monday morning at a statewide press conference with local officials pushing for a state fiscal solution and especially for the "community dividend" long touted by the former governor.

"If we don't address our fiscal problem, we will fail," Mr. Hickel said with characteristic directness.

We have a duty as a human community, he added, to match the grandeur and opportunity God gave Alaska. We need a powerful vision. We must live up to the obligations of the "owner state" -- and leadership to get this done.

And: "Oh, to be as rich again as we were before Prudhoe Bay -- as rich in spirit!"

And, more pragmatically: "We have \$27 billion in the bank, and we can't get across town!" You couldn't miss the reference to Lake Otis and Tudor or the larger one to legislative stalemate.

Mayor Mark Begich spoke of the fiscal uncertainty that hurts the economy by making businesses less confident. He pitched the road bond that includes help for Lake Otis and Tudor. And he pitched other needs around the state -- basic government costs in the Bush, education in Mat-Su and so on. Borough Mayor Edith Vorderstrasse spoke to the strains of rural communities, where oil prices truly threaten to leave people in the cold and dark.

All this is an extended prelude to the special session of the Alaska Legislature opening today in Juneau. The mayors got their priorities right: They called first for an endowmentlike percent of market value approach to Alaska Permanent Fund management to bring it in line with modern practices and protect its long-run value. That secures the seed corn. And second, they called for using "a safe and sustainable portion" of Permanent Fund earnings for dividends, education and community dividends.

The deeper question at the special session is whether the Legislature can surmount the partisanship and self-interest of the past to provide a foundation for the future. Mr. Hickel's urgings are driven, no doubt, by a kind of amazement that a state with so many assets seems so unwilling to use them. He is, characteristically, onto something.

BOTTOM LINE: POMV and a fiscal plan are needed now. They are necessary, if not sufficient, tools for progress.