

2004_6_24_FBX_The governor's words

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The governor's words

Just a few days ago, the words in this space bemoaned the likely fate of a favored old nag in the state's race for a solution to its recurring fiscal problem. It appeared then, and remains so today, that the horse won't reach the finish line in the special legislative session under way in Juneau.

But there may be a bit of hope down the stretch if the words of Gov. Frank Murkowski, and not those of his aides, are to be believed.

The governor, in comments shortly after speaking to the Senate Finance Committee on Tuesday, indicated he would not automatically reject a proposal from the Legislature to use its existing authority to spend earnings of the Alaska Permanent Fund for general government purposes. "I'll make up my mind depending on what it is," the governor said.

That's a welcome softening of a hard-line position the governor took against the old nag while campaigning for office in 2002.

As a candidate, then-Sen. Murkowski issued a formal fiscal policy paper that stated he would "insist that any proposal to fundamentally change the management of the Alaska Permanent Fund or spend the earnings of the fund require approval by Alaska voters," even though the approval isn't required by law. Elsewhere in the policy paper the soon-to-be governor stated the earnings should "under no circumstances" be spent without a vote by the people.

The promise of a public vote--a promise also made by several legislative candidates--has been a major hindrance to enacting a sensible solution to the annual budget shortfalls.

So, again, it is good to hear a softening.

But did the governor mean to say it? Is it a genuine softening?

Alaskans can't be sure because, in a remarkable exchange, the governor on Tuesday publicly disagreed with his chief of staff about what exactly the administration's position is on the use of permanent fund earnings without voter approval. Chief of Staff Jim Clark had just reminded the governor that the administration's long-standing position is that the fund's earnings cannot be used without public permission.

Confusion at the top can damage a chief executive's credibility and reduce confidence in that person's leadership. If the governor has indeed changed his position, he needs to tell Alaskans he has done so and to explain why.

There is nothing wrong, after all, with an elected official changing a position. Residents, wherever they live, should want leaders who have the courage to

bend.

To this point, the governor and others in his administration have spoken fervently of their desire for a public vote on the use of fund earnings. That's one reason another idea, the Percent of Market Value plan, has looked so good to the administration: The POMV idea actually makes money available to the government by changing the makeup of the permanent fund, a change that can occur only through a constitutional amendment--which requires a public vote and which would be seen as fulfilling the campaign pledge for such a vote. The idea, unfortunately, appears destined for failure in the special session.

Now the governor appears to be backing away from his demand for voter approval of any plan to spend fund earnings, saying he is "not going to take away the authority of the Legislature to spend what it has the authority to spend."

The Legislature certainly can spend the earnings--on anything it wants--by a simple majority vote but has consistently declined to do so, fearing voter retribution at election time. It's a fear founded on voter greed for the dividend. And it's a fear that, due to that greed, leads to the misguided promises to protect the dividend from a so-called government raid. Because of it, the state has wallowed in extremely partisan fighting while a ripe pot of money sits by unused.

Has the governor now seen the folly of his own campaign promise? If he has and admits to it, he'll take some lumps. But he should also be given some praise for making the change--assuming it really is his new position.