The 2020 session was one for the record books. Between adjourning historically early to comply with unprecedented health mandates, and returning for just a few days in May to approve federal COVID funding, more work yet remains. And the legislature stands ready to meet the challenge and bring relief to Alaska.

All of this after cautious optimism seemed to abound in January. Alaska had just begun to dig itself out of a 39-month recession spurred by the oil price crash of 2014. Governor Dunleavy’s FY 21 operating budget proposal was relatively reasonable. Then came COVID-19 and with it, the collapse of oil prices. The Permanent Fund lost nearly 15 percent of its market value within a matter of days. And just like that, several hundred million dollars of revenue, vanished into thin air.

But the legislature rallied and passed a budget on the 69th day with a $1000 PFD. We also quickly passed Governor Dunleavy’s supplemental budget proposal – the largest in history, to make up for shortfalls caused by his unrealistic cuts and vetoes last year. Since then, the legislature worked with the Administration to make available $1.25 billion in federal funds to help communities and small businesses during the COVID crisis.

The not-so-good news is that next year’s session could be even more dramatic, with a projected hole of at least billion dollars, and the state’s savings reduced to a mere $500 million. But that’s a conversation for another day.
Accomplishments for Alaska

While COVID-19 derailed our usual legislative session, much was still accomplished. More than 65 bills were passed and signed by the governor ranging in topic from insurance coverage for telehealth visits to establishing, in law, Alaska Native Heritage Month.

We also passed a budget in record time and saw Alaskans from all political stripes join hands to complete our work. As always though, a few items remain unresolved and will require more attention over the coming months and years. Here are a few of them:

- Ferries:

  The Alaska Marine Highway is a gem that predates statehood. I have always fought for service to Southwest Alaska, where livelihoods depend on a well-funded marine highway. The entire system is in dire straits, but common sense across all parties seems to have broken through, and funding is beginning to trickle back in. I’m committed to doing everything I can to ensure the Tustumena is able to provide regular service to our district. She plays a huge role in being able to ship cargo and passengers from Anchorage and elsewhere to the eight communities in Southwest who have depended upon her for years.

- VPSO Program

  Last year, I led the charge to establish an interim committee, chaired by Rep. Chuck Kopp (R - Anchorage) and Sen. Donny Olson (D - Golovin) to examine why the VPSO program wasn’t working, and to come back to the legislature with solutions. A host of recommendations, the product of months of research and hearings, was to be rolled into legislation and passed in hopes of reforming and salvaging the program. That work was halted, unfortunately, but I will continue this incredibly important work when we return. Working to ensure our residents in rural Alaska can feel safe and protected will continue to be a major focus of mine.
I’m particularly glad to see the 31st Legislature take strides to make issues important to Alaska Natives a central part of its work. As Speaker of the House, I created the first ever committee to address tribal issues, the House Tribal Affairs Committee. I could not be prouder of the work done by Chair Tiffany Zulkosky from Bethel, who accepted chairmanship of the committee. Additionally, passage of HB126, establishing Alaska Native Heritage Month, is a chance for the entire state to reflect on the contributions of Alaska Natives. And while the work wasn’t completed, I was happy to see dialogue and progress on tribal issues generally.

I’d also like to take a moment and acknowledge the bipartisanship that took place during the past two years. Very few people know that the House Majority is the only bipartisan coalition in the entire country, and it proved to be a shining example of what can be done when partisan differences are set aside to work together for all of Alaska. That said, I continue to be worried about the vetoed funds for school bond debt reimbursement and K-12 education, both of which were fully funded by the legislature. The governor has yet to advise how or why federal CARES Act money will help communities backfill that shortage.

House District 37 is a fishing district, whether it be commercial, sport or subsistence. As a member of the House Fisheries Committee I strived to ensure that funds from the state budget and the federal CARES Act were directed towards the fishing industry. My office has been working with citizens, tribal entities, businesses and other stakeholders across Southwest Alaska to ensure everyone’s voices are being heard during this unprecedented period of time.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to my office with any comments or questions that might be of interest to you. My office has been acting as a clearinghouse for information during the COVID crisis and as your voice in the legislature, I am doing my very best to make you are being heard loud and clear.
For all the latest updates and state mandates, check out the Department of Health and Social Services COVID-19 information page: http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Epi/id/Pages/COVID-19/default.aspx.

During these uncertain times, it’s also important to focus on the positive. Please take moment with me to send congratulations and best wishes to our future leaders, the graduating Class of 2020! You are the first class in Alaska’s history to go through a pandemic while also graduating from high school, an accomplishment that should not be taken lightly. As you embark on the next passage of your journey through life, never forget that you had the privilege of growing up in a small town and how lucky you are for it!