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We're back.

A few special sessions. An election cycle. A new president. A new year.

And with a new — the Thirtieth — Alaska Legislature comes, finally, a new newsletter!

Cheerfully greeting us legislators assembled here in Juneau is a ~\$3 billion budget deficit, just as foreboding as last year, and the year before that, and the year before that.

The deficit hasn't changed, but we have — “we” being the Alaska House of Representatives.

The Alaska House is controlled by a newly-formed bipartisan coalition composed of urban and rural Democrats, balanced budget-oriented Republicans, and independents.

We organized, foremost, to balance Alaska's budget and do our darn best to arrest Alaska's slow-motion descent into recession.

The coalition's governing philosophy — one that I strongly advocate internally and publicly — is to set aside divisive, ideological, charged issues on the fringes and focus instead on the issues that everyone agrees need solutions.

It's not like we're short on problems to solve. Why focus on the issues that divide legislators into warring parties of cats and dogs?

The budget is a heck of a problem. I'm excited to see what we can do, for Alaska's sake.





Cold Hard Math

No solution that actually, mathematically balances the budget is pleasant. Kicking the can is worse. The problem only compounds, further mortgaging the future of Alaska.

I am committed to the "least worst," "least bad" solution we can come up with that actually balances the budget — no fuzzy math, no wishful thinking allowed. Basically, the only solution is more budget cuts, more revenue, and restructuring our \$55 billion colossus of a Permanent Fund to pay out \$1,000-plus dividends while also keeping the State of Alaska solvent.

Note: "and." That means all three, all at the same time. Broccoli, cauliflower, and spinach, all in the same meal.

I have yet to see another budget proposal that actually, mathematically balances the budget while also passing the red-face test of plausibility.

How's that for sweet, soothing political talk?

Man vs. Budget

The operating budget is the Legislature's annual test of mettle and endurance.

Like jumping into the North Pacific on Winter Equinox, there are two ways to take the budget plunge: you can either go all in, all at once, in a burst of zeal, or you can immerse yourself bit by bit through sheer will.



Taken moments before heading down for the beginning of floor debate, plenty of reading in hand.

My first four years in the Alaska House under Speaker Mike Chenault (R-Nikiski), we took the "rapid plunge" approach with the operating budget. The budget is technically a discrete piece of legislation (this year, [HB 57](#)), and is treated as such. All legislation is subject to amendments. The operating budget, being hugely important legislation, endures an avalanche of amendments. Under Speaker Chenault, we'd start debate on the budget and budget amendments in the morning, and we'd finish in the early or even not-so-early hours of the morning.





Juneau.

"Bedraggled"

Last Monday — six days ago — was the first day debating this year's operating budget. Under Speaker Bryce Edgmon (D-Dillingham), we took it steady as she goes. Largely out of necessity.

In past years, 20 or 30 amendments would be offered to the operating budget, and we could get through them in one Herculean session. This year, House Republicans took a more vigorous approach to expressing their perspective on the State of Alaska budget.

Because the House Republicans took care not to disclose how many amendments would be offered, and because amendments can be "trickled in" a few at a time (to prevent one from knowing how many are yet to come), rumors filtered through the building. Would there be 200 amendments? 300? 340?

While I don't think anyone set up a betting pool to guess the final count, it sure beat March Madness for hallway gossip.

In the end, 134 amendments were introduced (120-plus by House Republicans), perhaps setting a most-ever-amendments record in the history of the Alaska Legislature. After five straight days of floor debate, heated tempers, exasperation, and laughter, we finished with much relief on Friday afternoon.

Bedraggled. That's the word which best describes the entire experience. The remarkably industrious Rep. Tammie Wilson (R-North Pole) authored a plurality of the amendments, and she may have even set an Alaska Legislature record for most amendments introduced by a single legislator on a single piece of legislation.* I'm in awe of her work ethic, even if I wasn't necessarily supportive of the amendments themselves.

Most of all, I'm glad to be done and to support a budget that about holds the line from the previous fiscal year, one that can serve as a foundation on which to build a fiscal plan.

* I haven't yet consulted the legislative librarians, but I will.



The weather, too, has been feeling particularly . . . bipartisan?

The view from our office went from this (top) in January — to this (bottom) in March.

Select Committee on Ethics

The Legislature has a committee that reviews ethics complaints and allegations and adjudicates whether legislators have broken ethics rules. Obviously, it's important.

The Select Committee on Ethics has a vacancy for a “public member.” You might think, “Oh, that could never be me,” but instead you should ask yourself, “Why not me?”

Any Alaskan may apply — and may do so [here](#).

Staff Notes: Hello from the Other Side of the Room

While Jonathan is a highly capable guy (see: attending staff meetings by kayak), he's only human, and he gets by with a little help from his staff. (Although yes, he writes his own newsletters. Trust me — he's very stubborn about it).

Our team this spring is Reid Magdanz (Arctic ambassador, Kotzebue), Alicia Norton (University of Alaska Intern, Juneau), Stephanie Gilardi-Botero (State Affairs Committee Aide, transient Sitkan), James Hart (First Alaskans Institute Public Policy Fellow, Haines), and me: Berett Wilber (token constituent, Sitka).

We're armed with Alaska's Statutes (they're heavy). We shepherd bills from committee to committee (they wear "goldenrod" jackets, for style and convenience). We carry the state seal single-handedly (it's made of styrofoam).

And we love our jobs. We love the district. We're excited to do what we can to be helpful.



Reid, James, and Stephanie holding down the fort. Photos by Berett Wilber.

We've got statutes!

Remember the [great statute giveaway of 2015?](#)

Well, this one isn't quite so great. But we do have two complete sets of 2014 Alaska statutes. Yes, contain your excitement. First two replies have dibs.

Take good care,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "JKT". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the letters overlapping and connected.

Representative Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins