Kodiak Delegation Gears Up For Session

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

The Alaska State Legislature kicks off the new session next week, and Kodiak’s delegation of Senator Gary Stevens and Representative Alan Austerman are busy packing up for the trip to Juneau.

KMXT spoke with both earlier this week.

Stevens indicated money will be tight because of the lower revenue projections coming out of the governor’s office.

“It’s way too early to say what’s going to be in the capital project budget, but we’re going to fight hard, Rep. Austerman and myself to make sure Kodiak gets its fair share, and so we’re looking at that carefully and well as for our other communities. A lot of things to consider, but in the end the capital budget will be smaller than it has been in the past only because revenues are down so low. But the governor has left us room in the budget to add local projects, and that’s the way it should be.”

Austerman, however, wasn’t sure there was a lot of room for local capital budgets.

“He has left what he considers to be headroom for legislators to add more money to the current budget that he has placed out there. That again is part of the discussion that we’ll have to have how much we increase the budget, because every time we increase the budget it has to come out of savings accounts. We’re going to have to have that kind of conversation about whether we like the current governor’s budget or whether it’s too big or two small, or whether we want to continue to spend down our savings, and at what rate.”

Another Alaska lawmaker, Representative Tammie Wilson, has prefiled a bill to change state law that would eliminate the requirement for local governments to contribute to public schools. The North Pole Republican says the state should pick up the whole bill for K-12 education, because Wilson says current law penalizes voters for forming cities or boroughs.

Austerman says he has not made up his mind on Wilson’s bill yet.

“As co-chair of finance and the operational budget where that funding will have to come out of, I’m going to have to take a hard look at how much money we can afford to spend and how much money the state has and what is the responsibility of the municipalities. When you look at what the state of Alaska is already funding, both in revenue sharing, to municipalities, and we’ve already picked up everything above 22 percent of the cost of PERS and TERS retirement system for municipal employees. What is the balance? And I’m not sure anybody’s defined that yet.”

Stevens agreed that the state fully funding schools could mean less money for municipalities all around, and might not be in line with the state constitution.

“Right now we have a principal in this state –

we’ve always had it since statehood – that there be equity in education. That, if you live in Chefornak, your child has the same opportunities for education that your child does if you live in say, Anchorage. That equity from the past that the state funds to a certain level, and then we allow the communities to fund up to a cap. So the real question to me is does this mean, after we look through all the details, does it mean that a rich community could put more money into educating their kids that a poor community could. And I think most Alaskans would say – and I think our constitution says – that that’s really not right. Every child no matter where you live, whatever your race, whatever your financial status in life, your parents financial status, is that you have a fair opportunity to get a good education.”

The second session of the 28th Alaska Legislature starts on Tuesday (Jan. 21).