

ALASKA COURT SYSTEM
State of Alaska
Office of the Administrative Director

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November 20, 2008

Pat Davidson
Legislative Auditor
Division of Legislative Audit
P.O. Box 113300
Juneau, Alaska 99811-3300

RECEIVED
NOV 25 2008
LEGISLATIVE AUDIT

Re: Preliminary Audit Report
Board of Governors of Alaska Bar Association
Sunset Review, November 8, 2008

Dear Ms. Davidson:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer a written response to the findings and recommendations contained in the above-referenced preliminary audit report. This response represents the views of the Administrative Office of the Alaska Court System (AOC).

The AOC takes no position on the findings and recommendations directed at the Board of Governors of the Alaska Bar Association. We agree with the conclusion that the Board protects the public by ensuring that persons licensed to practice law are qualified. We also concur in the recommendation to the legislature that the termination date of the Board be extended to June 30, 2017.

However, we take issue with the auditor's comments beginning on page 11. Those comments go beyond the scope of the audit by making conclusory observations about the merits of self-regulation by the Bar, and suggesting that attorney discipline in Alaska could be a government function. Specifically, it is suggested that the following options be considered:

- Disciplinary investigations performed by Alaska Court System employees
- Place disciplinary function under the Supreme Court with a Disciplinary Board appointed by the court

The historical record shows that attorney discipline has always been a matter of importance to the supreme court. In fact, when the supreme court first asserted control of the Bar over the Bar's strenuous objection in 1964, it did so by promulgating rules governing the discipline of attorneys, among other things. See *In the Matter of an Application for an Order Vacating ALASKA SUPREME COURT ORDERS NO. 64, 68, 69, 70 and 71, and Other Relief*, 395 P.2d 853 (Alaska 1964). Public confidence in the process of attorney discipline is essential.

Equally important, however, is the need to keep separate the prosecutorial and adjudicative functions inherent in attorney discipline. Under our system of government, it is imperative that those who have the duty of charging transgressors and proving their guilt do not have the final say in determining that guilt. As currently designed, the system of attorney discipline keeps a wall between those two roles. It is the Bar which has the duty to investigate and prosecute allegations of attorney misconduct, to make preliminary findings, and to recommend punishment. It is the supreme court which makes the final determination of guilt or innocence, and which makes the final determination regarding appropriate punishment.

The fundamental problem with placing the attorney discipline function within the court system is that the entity responsible for investigating and prosecuting attorney misconduct would also be the entity responsible for making the ultimate determination of guilt or innocence. As the final adjudicative body for cases decided under the Alaska Constitution, it is inappropriate for the supreme court to exercise both executive and judicial powers in disciplinary matters.

There may be other states in which the supreme court exercises both prosecutorial and adjudicative authority. However, that does not mean that it is good public policy to do so, or that doing so is consistent with the fundamental principles under which our system was intended to operate. Administrative convenience is not an adequate justification for this consolidation of government power.

If it is ever determined that the current system of attorney discipline does not work adequately and needs to be changed, a better model would be the one utilized by the Judicial Conduct Commission. This commission is part of the judicial branch of government, not the court system, and as such it is independent of the supreme court. The commission engages in investigatory and prosecutorial tasks when allegations of judicial misconduct are made, and makes recommendations to the supreme court. The supreme court exercises the judicial function, serving as the final arbiter of guilt or innocence.

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It is true that a separate disciplinary entity such as this could be paid for by Bar dues and have no cost to the general fund at this time. However, the persons staffing said agency would be new state employees. The legislature has demonstrated an intent in recent years to limit the addition of permanent, full-time state employees, and absent concrete evidence that the current system does not adequately serve the public interest, it may be disinclined to create a new state bureaucracy.

Thank you for providing the opportunity to comment on this audit. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. S. Christensen III', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

C. S. Christensen III
Deputy Administrative Director

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ALASKA BAR

A S S O C I A T I O N

December 2, 2008

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LEGISLATIVE AUDIT

Pat Davidson
Legislative Auditor
c/o Division of Legislative Audit
4341 B Street, Ste. 400
Anchorage, AK 99503

Dear Ms. Davidson:

Thank you for the thorough sunset review of the Alaska Bar Association and the opportunity to respond to your preliminary audit report.

Sunset and Fiscal Note

The Board concurs with extending the sunset date of the Alaska Bar Association Board of Governors until June 30, 2017.

There will be no fiscal note attached to any bill filed with the legislature to extend the sunset date of the Board of Governors, as the Bar Association will not be seeking any state funding for its operational costs. The Bar Association has obtained state funding only during the limited time frame between 1981 and 1986, and only for the per diem and travel expenses of the three public members who sat on the Board. For the past 22 years, the Bar Association has paid those expenses without state funding.

As noted in the audit, the operations of the Bar Association are funded entirely by Bar members through bar dues, admission fees, Continuing Legal Education seminar fees, Lawyer Referral Service charges, convention fees, and interest income. Ironically, a decision to sunset the Bar would have a multi-million dollar fiscal impact to the state.

Response to Recommendation No. 1: The Supreme Court has adopted an MCLE rule and will review the program in three years.

The Alaska Supreme Court adopted an MCLE rule in December 2007, effective January 1, 2008. Bar Association members will be required to report for the first time by February 1, 2009.

The MCLE rule requires that all active Bar members complete at least three hours of ethics CLE per year and report that they have done so. Members must also report whether they have completed nine hours of general CLE, and if they have not done so, they must report the estimated hours of general CLE that they did complete.

In their commentary to the rule, the Supreme Court stated that “To protect the public, ensure that lawyers remain mindful of their obligations to their clients, and to address the area about which the Association receives the majority of questions from and complaints about lawyers, the Supreme Court is imposing a mandatory requirement for ethics CLE on all active Bar members.”

The Court also stated that “At the end of three years, the Supreme Court will again assess the project’s results, including recommendations and statistics provided by the Association, and will determine whether an expanded mandatory CLE program is necessary.”

At the end of the three year period, the Association will have the benefit of its experience in administering the mandatory ethics and reporting program. It will be able to determine what issues and problems have arisen and will also allow the Association time to educate Bar members about complying with the educational and reporting requirements.

The Association has hired a part-time MCLE Administrator to administer the program. In addition, the Association is offering a free ethics CLE program on November 5, 2008, in accordance with the Supreme Court’s wish that the Association provide at least three hours a year of ethics CLE at no cost to members. This program will be available in a variety of formats: live, via webcast or on DVD.

Response to Recommendation No. 2. We agree that Lawyer Public Discipline History should be available on the Alaska Bar Association website.

The legislative auditor notes that the Alaska Bar Association has joined a consortium of other state and local bars aimed at replacing our database with a new member management system. This will include a module specifically for lawyer discipline data. This system will provide a means to post public discipline information on the Bar’s website.

It has been the Bar's goal since the website was first launched in 1998 to post public discipline information.

Like many computer programming projects, the implementation of the new database is taking longer than originally anticipated. Issues include the need to modify and test programs that are unique to Alaska. The new MCLE requirement also took priority over the implementation of other program modules, such as discipline.

In addition, the fact that only a minority of states publish their lawyers discipline list on their websites indicates the difficulty many states have in automating this information. Timeliness and accuracy are essential to this process.

The Board agrees that having public discipline information available on our website is a desirable goal and we will continue to work to that end. We anticipate that the new discipline module, including online reporting of public discipline, will be operational in the coming 12 – 18 months.

Response to Recommendation No. 3. We agree that the Bylaws of the Alaska Bar Association should be modified to specifically include conference call meetings of the Board and to provide for reasonable public notice of those meetings.

From time to time the Board of Governors finds it necessary to call meetings between regularly scheduled Board meetings to take up specific items which should not be delayed until the next Board meeting. The Board limits its action to those items listed in the call of the meeting.

Bar staff recognizes that the conference call meetings since June 30, 2006 did not meet the 30 day public notice requirement for Board meetings. However, the need for a conference call meeting of the Board is often realized only a week or two in advance, and therefore, it could not meet the 30 day notice requirement.

The staff will draft a proposed amendment to the Bylaws, to be taken up by the Board of Governors, to provide that the President may call a conference call meeting of the Board as appropriate to conduct business as necessary between regularly scheduled Board meetings. This will recognize conference calls as a unique type of Board meeting, and, in

accordance with AS 44.62.310(e), the proposed Bylaw will state that "reasonable public notice" will be given.

The Bylaws will also be amended to clarify that Board of Governors meetings, as well as Association meetings, are governed according to Roberts Rules of Order, Newly Revised. The Board has operated under these rules, but this will be clearly stated in the Bylaws.

Matters "not accepted" for investigation.

Page 17 states that 80% of the grievances received were not accepted for investigation due to lack of merit. While formal investigations were not conducted, these matters were thoroughly reviewed by discipline section staff counsel with expertise in attorney grievance matters and both complainants and respondent attorneys were informed in writing of the reasons that the matters were not accepted for investigation.

Concluding Comments: Lawyer self-regulation has been effective and efficient in Alaska.

The overall conclusion of the audit is that the Board effectively serves the public interest through its lawyer admission and discipline process. We also believe that lawyer self-regulation is working very effectively and efficiently in Alaska. To its credit, the Alaska Bar Association has one of the most aggressive and effective discipline systems in the country.

In 2006, the Bar Association conducted an e-mail and phone survey of the members of the National Organization of Bar Counsel whose members staff disciplinary jurisdictions nationwide. Of the 48 states the Bar was able to contact, 26 indicated that they were not state government agencies.

As reported in our December 16, 2005 response, 13¹ jurisdictions, in addition to Alaska, indicated that they were not state government agencies under their supreme courts; 13² generally indicated that they were considered creations of their supreme courts, but either not

¹ Alabama, Arizona, Hawaii, Idaho, Kentucky, Montana, Nevada, North Carolina, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

² Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia.

considered state government agencies or state employees; and, 22³ indicated that they were state government agencies under their supreme courts.

Based on this survey, Alaska is not unique in its approach to attorney discipline. Indeed, because the Bar Association performs these vital functions under the supervision of the Alaska Supreme Court, its system is similar to those in place in a significant number of other state jurisdictions.

We believe that there would be significant additional costs to both the court and the Bar Association if the attorney discipline system in Alaska was carried out by a government agency. Currently, the Bar Association has one bar counsel, two assistant bar counsel, one paralegal, two legal secretaries, and two other employees of the Bar who provide support to the discipline system in addition to their other Bar duties.

Currently these employees have the benefit of shared costs of office space, conference room, computer system, telephone system, copy machines, etc. with the rest of the Bar staff. In addition, the Bar's system administrator provides computer support to all Bar employees. If the discipline employees were split off from the Bar Association, they would lose the benefit of this shared functionality and they would have to purchase and maintain separate space and equipment.

Currently discipline hearings are heard by a members of a volunteer committee made up of attorneys and public members. If discipline were split off from the Bar Association, the state would need to staff this function with state hearing officers.

Currently bar counsel supervises the assistant bar counsel and discipline staff, as well as handling such other discipline matters as reinstatement, etc. He also handles approximately 800 calls a year giving informal ethics advice to members of the Bar. If a new state agency had less than three lawyers on staff, this valuable service would not be feasible and the current caseload would likely see a dramatic increase in processing time. The discipline section would also lose the assistance of the two staff persons who provide other support to the discipline section.

³ California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

Meanwhile, the Board of Governors would still need to have its own staff counsel, so the Bar Association would still have the expense of a lawyer and legal secretary on its staff.

There would also be additional expense if there was a Disciplinary Board separate from the Board of Governors. Currently, the Board of Governors acts as the Disciplinary Board at its regularly scheduled board meetings. The budget for the Board travel is included in the Board of Governors budget, and is not included as part of the discipline budget, so Discipline Board meetings would be a new expense.

The cost to Bar members to support additional staff, separate offices and equipment and separate Boards would mean a significant increase in bar dues, the addition of a separate disciplinary assessment, or that these expenses come out of the state general fund.

We believe that the subjective benefit of splitting out the discipline function from the Bar is outweighed by the practical and economic realities.

It is also our belief that the present management system of the Bar provides a blend of private and governmental functions, insuring both accountability and good management. For example, the Bar is an instrumentality of the state and subject to legislative audits. Its meetings are open to the public. Members of the public sit on discipline hearings and fee arbitration panels as well as on the Board of Governors. Its rule making and discipline functions are overseen by the Supreme Court, which assures a sound investigative and judicial process of discipline. Finally, the statewide lawyer membership on the Board also ensures that the Bar Association is both responsive to the needs of its members, and qualified to address such issues as admission standards and peer review.

Reserves of the Alaska Bar

The Board has a policy to hold a working capital reserve in an amount equal to four month's expenses (\$212,500/month or \$850,000.) However it is not unusual for a non-profit association to hold a reserve in an amount equal to six to nine months of expenses. (Ranging from \$1,275,000 - \$1,912,000.)

Unlike state agencies, the Bar cannot request supplemental appropriations from the Legislature or pool resources if an unexpected event occurs which would incur significant financial expense. The Board also needs to be able to "save" for the financial viability of planned projects or events. For example, the Bar is in the process of replacing its entire database, a multi-year project that will cost nearly \$200,000.

Between 1981 and 2005, Bar dues had only been raised twice: from \$310 to \$450 in 1994; and, from \$450 to \$550 in 2005.

At the October 2007 meeting, the Board of Governors approved the first bar dues reduction in the history of the Alaska Bar Association. To make the reduction, the Board voted to change a twenty-five year old budget policy that increased the unappropriated capital to offset future year deficits, deferring an increase in bar dues. Now the Board will budget on a "pay as you go" basis. This resulted in an approved draw down of the then \$1.2 million unappropriated capital by approximately \$400,000 for 2008. Active members of the bar saw their 2008 dues decrease to \$410. 2008 inactive member dues were \$135.

The Board reviewed the 2009 budget at the October 2008 meeting and voted to set 2009 active member bar dues at \$450 (plus \$10 for the Lawyers' Fund for Client Protection) and inactive dues at \$150. This will result in an estimated loss in 2009 of \$340,697, leaving a projected estimate of unappropriated capital of \$670,536 at the end of 2009.

Lawyers' Fund for Client Protection

Every year, Bar members each pays ten dollars to the Lawyers' Fund for Client Protection. This is a trust fund which serves as a safety net primarily for clients who have suffered monetary losses as a result of dishonest acts by their lawyers. This Fund currently has \$1,122,144. These funds are designed to protect the public and cannot be used for general operating expenses.

To date in 2008, \$28,100 in claims was awarded to clients of attorneys who were found to be dishonest in their dealings with the clients. \$127,235 was awarded in 2007 and \$31,972 was awarded in 2006.

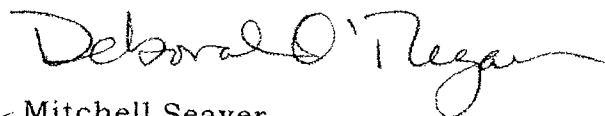
As an instrumentality that predates the ratification of the Alaska Constitution, the Alaska Bar maintains these funds under Article IX, Sec.

Response to Preliminary Audit Report
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7 of the Alaska Constitution. It is unclear whether the Bar could continue to do so if portions of its powers were split to a state agency.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the audit report. We trust that our response has been helpful, and that it demonstrates the Board's continuing commitment to improving the legal profession and service to the public.

Sincerely,
Alaska Bar Association



for Mitchell Seaver
President

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