

Rep. Max Gruenberg

Alaska State Legislature

Rep. Bryce Edgmon



Rep. Paul Seaton, Chair

HOUSE 90-DAY SESSION EVALUATION SUBCOMMITTEE

HB 71 – Repealing the 90-day Session Limit

HB 71 repeals AS 24.05.150(b), the 90-day limit for regular legislative sessions enacted by ballot initiative in 2006. Legislative Council established a 6 member 90-day Session Evaluation Task Force in 2008. The House side of the Task Force surveyed House members and staff to create a basis for a recommendation. Thirty-one House members responded to the survey and the final recommendation was to repeal the 90-day limit.

The Legislature has met for three 90 day sessions and has had the time to experience the advantages and disadvantages of the truncated session. While the personal benefit of a shorter session means less time away from families, homes and private sector jobs, it is the subcommittee's opinion that the 90-day limit on the legislative session does not serve the best interest of the State of Alaska. The survey results demonstrated that most Representatives believed the shortened session rushes legislation, hinders discussion, decreases the public's participation and shifts power to the executive.

Representatives surveyed overwhelmingly felt that less committee time is spent on bills and more bills are passed from committee with only one hearing with a 90-day session. Ninety percent of Representatives surveyed believed the 90-day session did not allow their personal legislation to be adequately evaluated by committees of referral. Eighty-six percent felt there was more pressure to move bills from committee with only a single hearing due to the shortened session. By the time the public is aware of an issue it may have moved from committee.

Legislators' schedules are packed, often starting with breakfast meetings and extending well into the evening hours. There are simply not enough hours in the day to meet with constituents, members of the public, and interest groups that want to communicate a message to their lawmakers. Eighty-three percent of the survey respondents believed they and their staff are not able to communicate with constituents as well during a 90-day session. This leaves legislators more isolated in a policy-making bubble.

With 30 days less in Juneau committees meet less, there is less scrutinizing of the departments, and therefore less oversight of the executive branch. Eighty-six percent of House members surveyed thought decreasing the session length cedes some of the power of the Legislature to the Governor or the bureaucracy.

Arguments in favor of a 90-day session should be reevaluated now that we have experience. The sponsors of the 90-day session initiative argued that it would increase the number of candidates, limit committee meetings, and result in a meaningful cost savings. In fact, the number of candidates running for office has been steadily decreasing since the initiative passed in 2006 (16% from 2004 to 2010). On average, 19



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more interim committee meetings have been held annually with a 90-day session. Obviously the direct cost of a regular session goes down with 30 less days; however even one special session annually can quickly eliminate that savings.

Legislative Affairs has transferred the 'savings,' around \$800,000, from the regular session line item in the budget to the special session line item. A special session is more expensive than a regular session. The Legislature added staff transportation to and from the regular session in response to perceived difficulty hiring staff for the shorter session. All of these factors have numerous costs and benefits, but the survey of House members found that 93% of respondents did not believe that there were significant overall savings to justify the shorter session.

Spending an extra 30 days with friends and families in home districts sounds tempting. However, the trade off in the perceived quality of legislation and the public input is not in the best interest of the State. Shortening the session rushes the legislative process, decreases public participation and gives more power to the governor. It is time to repeal the 90 day session and return to the constitutionally imposed 120 day limit.

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