

Alaska House of Representatives

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Water & Sewer Task Force Statement

In a 1995 speech to the Alaska Federation of Natives, the State's top executive said, "By the year 2005, I want the honey bucket to be a thing of the past. Alaskans in our villages aren't second-class citizens . . . and they shouldn't live in Third World conditions."

It is now 2016 and there are over eight thousand homes without piped sewer and water systems. Just five years ago that number was six thousand and Village Safe Water estimated it would cost \$650 million to bring those homes on line. The cost and scope of work keeps growing.

The State has consistently funded water and sewer but not at a level that adequately reduces the first-time installation backlog or keeps pace with increasing costs. This funding deficit is further impacted by the need to upgrade, repair, or replace aging or inadequate systems. Currently we use approximately 40% of the funds appropriated to address issues related to previously installed systems. Currently there is \$51.5 million in the State's budget for Village Water & Sewer Projects, which is less than 8% of the known need. Only \$9.5 million of that \$51.5 million comes from state sources.

It is critical that the State develop and implement a funding plan that addresses and reduces this growing deficit. With the decreases in available state revenue, we need to ensure that first-time service needs are addressed cost effectively.

Just throwing money at the problem is not a solution. In the past systems were not always properly matched to their communities. This often left the local utility with a system they could not afford or a system that could not be maintained by local operators.

There are emerging systems and new technologies that will need to be part of the answer. We need a comprehensive look at which solutions are available and which ones fit our conditions. We also need to ensure that we are not building ourselves a financial burden that cannot be sustained.

In short the goal of this Task Force is to find out how the State can solve the rural sanitation problem faster, better and cheaper. We've been doing the same thing for more than fifteen years. It's high time we took another look under the hood.