

PFDs for the Fairbanks Four
COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

By Bill Oberly and Luke Hopkins

On Dec. 15, 2015, the convictions of Marvin Roberts, Kevin Pease, George Frese and Eugene Vent, known collectively as the Fairbanks Four, were vacated and all of the charges against them were dismissed.

The four were free to walk out of the court house but had nothing to show for their last eighteen years.

Among the things lost to them were Alaska Permanent Fund Dividends for those eighteen years, even though they were no longer convicted of any crimes.

Current state law says an individual is ineligible to receive a PFD if he or she is incarcerated for a felony during any part of that year. Last legislative session, that is the one starting January 2017, Representative Scott Kawasaki introduced House Bill 127, which seeks to pay back permanent fund dividends to Alaskans whose convictions were vacated, reversed or dismissed.

As you might imagine,

the bill passed the House by a near unanimous vote of 38-1 last April and was sent over to the Senate, where it was assigned to the Senate State Affairs Committee chaired by Senator Kevin Meyer. There it still sits almost a full year later, without even getting a hearing.

The Fairbanks Four were released from prison with no money. They had been incarcerated for eighteen years on charges that were vacated and dismissed. Today, they have no record of conviction. What they do have is an eighteen-year hole in their job resume. To begin to fill this hole, the House passed HB 127 to provide them with the eighteen PFDs that were wrongly taken from them. They would each receive about \$25,000.00, the value of those 18 PFDs.

There would be no interest paid on this amount. They would only receive exactly what every other Alaskan received for those 18 years.

In testimony before the House Finance Committee, that committee was informed there is enough money currently sitting in the PFD fund for late qualifying dividend requests to cover these payments. The money

is there. The recipients are waiting.

The Senate must now do the right thing and correct this wrong that was done to these four men.

The legislation will provide for the same correction of any wrongful convictions which may happen in the future. These men, who were traumatized by 18 years in prison for a crime they did not commit, should not be further victimized by the denial of their PFDs for that period.

Sens. Pete Kelly, John Coghill and Click Bishop, these are your constituents. They are entitled to the money just like every other Alaskan.

And they need it as much as any Alaskan. It is time to step up and fill this hole. It is time to give these Alaskans their share of the permanent fund dividend. It is time for the Senate to act, like the House, and overwhelmingly support passage of HB 127.

Bill Oberly is the Executive Director of the Alaska Innocence Project and Luke Hopkins served as Mayor of the Fairbanks North Star Borough from 2009-2015.