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OPINION: Is it time for a law school in Alaska?

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(Tribune News Service)

As we face an increasing out-migration, an aging population, and a shortage of highly educated professionals, we need seminal ways to reinvigorate our state. One potential answer? Bringing a law school to Alaska. There would be numerous benefits to establishing a law school in our state.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average yearly salary for a lawyer in Alaska is around \$120,000, while the average paralegal or legal assistant makes \$63,000. Establishing a law school would encourage more lawyers to come to and stay in Alaska, creating more middle-class jobs and stimulating our local economy. Presumably, future lawyers staying in or coming to Alaska would bring their families with them, helping alleviate our state's dire labor shortage.

A law school in Alaska could focus on Alaska's unique challenges. Perhaps the school could offer a concentration in environmental and natural resources law, given the complex balance we face in utilizing our state resources, protecting the environment and respecting all competing land interests. Or a concentration in Alaska Native law,

similar to other law schools that have established Native American Law Centers, in order to train attorneys to provide services to a community that has long gone underserved.

Attorneys play critical roles in corporate reorganizations, particularly when companies are trying to grow through mergers and acquisitions. As we see corporations in Alaska continue to grow, particularly Alaska Native Corporations, we will need attorneys skilled in this area to manage these matters. What better way to ensure our home-grown companies' success than to train attorneys right here in Alaska?

The future law school could start partnerships with local and state police departments to provide further legal education to interested officers — or even provide a pathway for officers to earn a law degree at little to no cost, rewarding them for their service in protecting our communities.

An entirely new law campus doesn't have to be erected overnight. We can start with a pilot program, similar to the current WWAMI program sponsored by the University of Washington School of Medicine, with another established law school in the Lower 48 to provide students with the option of completing an entire juris doctorate degree in Alaska. Given that Seattle University School of Law already partners with Alaska Pacific University to give their Alaskan students the option of spending summers and their entire third year right here in Anchorage, this idea really isn't that far-fetched.

Past studies on the potential of building a law school in Alaska have provided excuse after excuse — there's not enough demand for it, it's too expensive, too few people would benefit and more. But are we OK with our state's "brain drain" continuing as high achievers leave the state for better educational prospects? Are we OK with living off the taxpayer dollars of other states by using them to educate our lawyers? I don't think so.

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I concur with Sen. Dan Sullivan that we need to revitalize Alaska's economy and create good jobs for residents. But I disagree that resource extraction is the best way to get there.

Investing in our state's future requires investing in our education. While establishing a law school would be an expensive feat, the myriad benefits to our state's economy and culture would outweigh the costs in the long run.

After all, it is only through innovation and education that we'll be able to move "North to the Future."

Claudia Tio-Cartagena is a graduate of the University of Florida and a current Master of Public Administration student at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

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