



Empire editorial: Stevens' longer Legislature measure deserves consideration

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Sen. Gary Stevens, R-Kodiak, has pitched a proposal to extend the legislative session to 120 days every other year. We are encouraged by the desire captured in Senate Bill 18 to find a middle ground between those who say the Legislature is constrained in its efforts by a 90-day session and others who believe 90 days is adequate to perform the people's business, and we are hopeful both cabinets and the governor will give Stevens' plan serious consideration.

In 2006, a slim majority of voters — less than 51 percent of the 51 percent of registered voters who cast ballots — decided to impose a 90-day maximum on the length of each legislative session. However, that vote put state law at odds with Alaska's Constitution, which allows the legislature to meet for 120 days each session. This creates tension between the constitution and state statute.

One main argument against the shorter gathering is hurried committee meetings do not allow for complete consideration of legislation. Proposals in front of the House and Senate are often complex, and the less time legislators can spend hashing out the finer points means more time the details are left to unelected staff. Lobbyists, whose jobs are to master all of the intricacies of their respective pet issues, remain 30 days smarter and better informed on legislation as well, allowing their influence to grow.

The counter from proponents of 90-day meetings is that lawmakers could be more efficient with their time. Complaints of committee meetings starting late are common, and such meetings are occasionally wasted on silly discussions and even sillier legislation. As the clock ticked away on the final day of last year's session, when the Legislature rushed to complete its work before 90 days elapsed (they missed by about 35 minutes), it took up measures giving the Malamute status as the state dog and naming a bridge in Petersburg.

Stevens' bill is one that splits the difference between the two camps, and would give each side half a loaf. Legislators, many screaming for more time to get their work done, would get 30 more days every other year. Backers of shorter sessions would still have accomplished their goal as well, getting both the voters and lawmakers — in a representative democracy, it's important to have both — to sign off on less than 240 days of debate for each Legislature, and this proposal is a better effort to strike a balance between the two camps than the effort gaining traction in the House which would return sessions to 120 days a year. That option is always available if Stevens' middle ground proves not to be enough.

Both sides in this debate have a point — a much more common occurrence, generally, than our present state of political discourse would lead someone to believe. We are pleased with Stevens' reasonable proposal to address the concerns of the parties. It's a sensible solution to a legal tension that needs resolution.