

ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

Opinions

We got it wrong: It's time to repeal SB 91

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Alaska needs to repeal Senate Bill 91. I say this as a former supporter of the criminal justice reform bill. I even co-sponsored it. I fully believed in the bill. I don't believe in it anymore.



Sen. Mia Costello

Senate Bill 91 has failed — and ever since its passage I have watched my neighbors and fellow Alaskans suffer as crime has increased, seemingly without end. We need to start over.

We got it wrong and we need to say so. If we don't acknowledge it's broken, we won't be able to fix it. The good intentions of Senate Bill 91, and the results seen in other states, are meaningless if Alaskans are not safe. We need to recognize the law failed us and has hurt Alaskans, families and businesses. The public has lost its trust in our criminal justice system, and repealing this law is the first step to gain it back.

[SB 91 isn't working. We need serious amendments — and serious investment]

When I was growing up in Turnagain, my parents left the front door unlocked for friends and neighbors. Today those same friends and neighbors tell me they no longer feel safe in their homes. With unprecedented levels of car theft and other crimes, we've lost the sense that our community is a safe place to live.

The first step toward feeling safe in our communities is a full repeal of Senate Bill 91. Here's why.

Those on the front lines of public safety — our police — tell us they no longer have the tools in law to keep us safe. Decreasing sentences under Senate Bill 91 was supposed to provide for rehabilitation and other alternatives for offenders that would prevent crime. That isn't happening. Alaskans are frustrated and angry to see thieves walk away from crime scenes with merely a citation.

The wholesale rewrite of our criminal statutes happened during an economic recession and drug epidemic in Alaska. Our criminal justice system is overwhelmed and not able to keep up with rapid changes required by Senate Bill 91. Lowering sentences, a new bail schedule, and changes to probation and parole have created confusion around our efforts to improve public safety.

[People in Anchorage are fed up with crime. Did SB 91 make it worse?]

Since the passage of Senate Bill 91, Alaska's crime rates have spiked. According to crime data collected by the FBI, Alaska jumped from being 25th in the country in burglary to 14th. For larceny, we went from 13th to second. In property crime, we've gone from 17th in the nation to third. Alaska is in the top 15 in every category of crime for the first time in our history — just since Senate Bill 91 passed.

Some fervent supporters of Senate Bill 91 say that crime has been increasing for years and that Senate Bill 91 isn't to blame. But this isn't quite true. According to the Department of Public Safety's Crime in Alaska 2016 report, over the last 15 years, the trends for larceny, burglary and vehicle thefts were down — until last year, when Senate Bill 91 was signed into law. All categories showed sharp spikes upward in 2016. In fact, except for murder, crime rates in all offenses increased in 2016.

Naturally, Alaskans don't want a knee-jerk reaction to public policy, and neither do I. Repealing the law, and reviewing the provisions that we agree can work one by one, is the best way to restart this process. We need continue thoughtful, focused dialogue with the Legislature and the public. However, that conversation needs to begin by listening to those of you who have been affected by Senate Bill 91.

Right now, criminals are emboldened, and law-abiding Alaskans have lost our sense of safety. We need to send a clear message. We owe it to our communities to repeal Senate Bill 91 and start over.

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