

# STATE OF ALASKA

ALASKA STUDENT LOAN CORPORATION

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March 13, 2009

HB172 – An Act relating to an investment in the education loan fund; relating to authority for the commissioner of revenue to enter into a bond purchase agreement and letter of credit with the Alaska Student Loan Corporation; and providing for an effective date.

## **Background on ASLC Liquidity Issues and Proposed Plan of Action**

### **Precipitating Events/Conditions**

In 2007, the market for Auction Rate Securities (ARS), which ASLC has successfully used to finance its variable rate education loans since 2002, collapsed in the wake of the subprime mortgage loan debacle. As a result, ARS are no longer a viable bond mode to finance new loan originations. As an alternative, ASLC intends to issue Variable Rate Demand Bonds (VRDB) or Obligations, for which there is still a market. Structurally, VRDBs attract investors because they are credit enhanced through an external liquidity provider, thereby eliminating investor liquidity risk. Due to the liquidity facility, VRDBs can be held by money market funds as investments.

The ARS market collapse impacted issuers nationwide. Over the course of 2008 the cost of liquidity and/or credit enhancement increased dramatically as demand grew exponentially, and supply declined at an alarming rate due to financial institution consolidations, ratings downgrades, and a general reluctance of the usual players to put further strain on their balance sheets. Liquidity costs, prior to the ARS market meltdown, ranged between 15 and 40 basis points per annum. Currently, those costs start at over 100 bases point, and rise from there. There is nothing occurring in the financial services arena to indicate this problem will improve any time soon. None of the recent federal initiatives to address the nation's economic ailments include a mechanism by which ASLC could acquire the needed liquidity support to issue VRDBs.

**ASLC Capacity to Meet New Loan Demand**—ASLC was last able to bond in June 2007. 2008-2009 academic year loans were funded through internal liquidity. Annual loan volume is projected to be approximately \$95 million. Although confident about its ability to fully fund loans for the year ending June 2009, Corporation projections verify the need to delay processing 2009-2010 loan applications until such time as sufficient external funding is secured. As described above, market-based issuance costs have reached prohibitive levels relative to the economics of the ASLC programs.

**ASLC Proposal for Alternative Financing Strategies**—A two-pronged approach is recommended:

1—authorize the Department of Revenue to meet the Corporation's immediate need for funding for its Alternative and Federal loan programs using a loan structure. No appropriation of state general funds is required because use of the funds constitutes an investment, not an expenditure. ASLC will cover all related costs, and provide a return on the investment similar to the return the funds would have derived if left in the general fund (with a stipulated not to exceed rate). The loan is governed by a trust agreement between ASLC and Revenue that sets out all related terms. The loan period may not exceed five years.

2—authorize the Department of Revenue to provide ASLC with the liquidity and/or credit support necessary to issue VRDBs. The credit enhancement program would allow ASLC to access the capital markets by attracting institutional purchasers (primarily money market funds), while also keeping bond issue costs low enough that ASLC can continue to offer low-cost education loans to Alaska students. As with the bridge loan, the facility fee will provide revenue to the State. The term length of the facility may not exceed five years and the amount issued with support from the facility may not exceed \$106 million.

In combination, these strategies are expected to cover loan demand through 2010, by which time market conditions should have normalized sufficient to dispense with this state support.

Provided on the following page are descriptions of efforts made in support of other state agency or nonprofit education lenders similarly impacted by the credit market collapse.

#### **Other States' Initiatives to Assist State Agency of Nonprofit Education Loan Lenders**

Several states have made liquidity and/or credit enhancement available to issuers.

California's approach has been very commercial in that the state's SBPA/LOC facility is available to any issuer inside or outside the state, and the primary goal has been to generate fee income for the funding source (CALPERS).

The State of Arkansas, acting through the State Board of Finance, entered into an \$80 million loan agreement with the Arkansas Student Loan Authority (ASLA). The interest rate is a variable rate reset semiannually by the State Bank Commissioner and approved by the State Board of Finance. The loan has a term of 18 months but can be extended. ASLA paid the State's out-of-pocket expenses and legal fees related to the issuance of the Note. A trust was developed to hold education loans made with loan proceeds and payments made on those education loans until the loan to the State is paid in full. The trust also holds state loan proceeds until the education loan is disbursed in the form of qualifying investment vehicles.

The New Mexico State Treasurer's Office purchased a \$50 million private placement bond from New Mexico Student Loans (NMSL). The bond is a short-term investment for the State of New Mexico at a competitive rate. A second deal was struck by which their State Treasurer's Office will purchase a bond from NMSL totaling \$95.1 million.

The State of Kentucky bought a \$50 million bond from the Kentucky Higher Education Student Loan Corp. The bond has a term of 445 days and carries a variable interest rate (originally set at 3.2%).

The South Carolina Student Loan Corporation issued \$600 million in student loan backed notes. The notes are variable rate notes rated AAA. A significant portion of the notes have been purchased by the State of South Carolina.

In Colorado, CollegeInvest, a division of the Colorado Department of Higher Education, originates loans to college and graduate students. The State loaned CollegeInvest \$30 million to prevent a Spring 2009 interruption in their lending program.



## Memorandum

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**Lee Donner**  
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**Date:** March 10, 2009

**To:** Diane Barrans, Executive Officer, Alaska Student Loan Corporation

**Cc:** Charlene Morrison, CFO, Alaska Student Loan Corporation

**Subject:** Ensuring Access to Student Loans in Alaska

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At your request, following is First Southwest Company's summary of events and circumstances which have culminated in the Alaska Student Loan Corporation's (ASLC) need for mid-term financing support from the State of Alaska.

Across the approximately thirteen months since the downgrade of the mono-line bond insurers and the collapse of the Auction Rate Securities (ARS) market, a number of additional developments have contributed to the emergence of serious ongoing challenges to the ability of entities like ASLC to fulfill their mission to ensure the uninterrupted availability of low cost loans (including both the Federal Family Education Loan Program (FFELP) and non-guaranteed alternative loans) for students who depend upon such loan products to finance the cost of their post-secondary educational goals.

One of those developments has been the large scale departure of investors from the entire asset-backed finance arena in what is often described as a "flight to quality." Another negative development has been the top to bottom re-examination of cash flow modeling and other credit rating analysis criteria by all three of the nationally recognized securities rating organizations, which development has only served to reinforce the perception on the part of reluctant investors that asset-backed securities are fraught with a higher level of risk than they had been previously led to believe. These two phenomena have reinforced each other to produce an escalating demand for higher interest rates and declining investor base for asset-backed securities in virtually every asset class.

Issuers like ASLC have responded to these negative developments by seeking liquidity and/or credit support from highly rated financial institutions in the form of a Standby Bond Purchase Agreements (SBPA) or Letters of Credit (LOC). At the same time that demand for SBPA or LOC support from national and international financial institutions has exploded in response to the conditions described above, most, if not all, of those financial institutions have been hit with threatened or actual downgrades of both their long term and short term credit ratings. All of this has combined to create a situation where the demand and cost for bank credit/liquidity support is increasing at the very same time that the availability of and investor confidence in the

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reliability of such bank credit/liquidity support has sharply declined. Directly related to all of this is the dramatically increased demand, from investors in the tax-exempt arena, for debt securities issued by, **or credit/liquidity supported by**, highly rated state and local governmental issuers.

The combination of conditions described above has resulted in a number of state governments looking for ways to assist the state agency or not-for-profit student loan providers (both FFELP and alternative) in their state to continue to be able to fulfill their mission of ensuring educational access through low cost college loans. In Arkansas, this cooperation between the State and the student loan agency they created many years ago resulted in a low cost variable rate bridge loan from the State to the loan agency. In South Carolina, the State purchased a significant portion of the state created student loan agency's last bond issue. Both of these cooperative efforts represent viable short-term solutions to a problem that is showing signs of becoming protracted. In other states, similar initiatives are being analyzed or are in various stages of actual development or implementation. The sole example from 2008 where the student loan provider had no market access problems is the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, where the State's support for THECB's student loan program includes a State of Texas General Obligation pledge for THECB's debt obligations.

Against the background of the liquidity, credit and market conditions discussed herein, it is becoming quickly apparent that the major Federal initiatives such as TARP and TALF are of very limited, if any, utility to state agency and not-for-profit loan providers in continuing to finance their low cost loan programs without disruption and resultant serious consequences for the students and parents who depend on them.

First Southwest Company serves as financial advisor to a number of such student loan providers in various parts of the country. Based on our knowledge of what is happening in the student loan finance arena on a national basis and our experience with those limited number of student loan providers who have been able to successfully access the capital markets over the past year, it is our very firm belief that the best hope for entities like ASLC to continue their mission without interruption will be a cooperative effort between such entities and their sponsoring state governments to create temporary financing vehicles, and more importantly, credit and/or liquidity facilities that meet investors' demand for the elimination of credit/liquidity risk, but at a level of cost that is sustainable within the economic limitations of the loan programs being offered to students and their parents.

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