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MEMORANDUM February 12, 2010

SUBJECT: Are ethics regulations proposed December 8, 2009, within the scope of the Department of Law's regulation-making authority? (Work Order No. 26-LS1493)

TO: Representative David Guttenberg

FROM: Dan Wayne
Legislative Counsel

You have asked if the Executive Branch Ethics Act regulations proposed by the Department of Law on December 8, 2009, are within the department's regulation-making authority or if the changes proposed would first require a change in statute by the legislature.

The Administrative Procedure Act says, at AS 44.62.020:

> Except for the authority conferred upon the lieutenant governor in AS 44.62.130 - 44.62.170, AS 44.62.010 - 44.62.320 do not confer authority upon or augment the authority of a state agency to adopt, administer, or enforce a regulation. To be effective, each regulation adopted must be within the scope of authority conferred and in accordance with standards prescribed by other provisions of law.

In this instance, the department's regulation-making authority comes from AS 39.52.950, which says:

> The attorney general may adopt regulations under the Administrative Procedure Act necessary to interpret and implement this chapter.

I see two places where this limited authority may be exceeded by the proposed regulations. Proposed 9 AAC 52.045 would allow the state to pay the transportation expenses of family members of the governor and lieutenant governor, even though the Act, at AS 39.52.120, prohibits that type of payment. The attorney general has previously covered this in a September 30, 2004, opinion, that said:

> For purposes of the Ethics Act, it is irrelevant that it does not cost the state more to fly the King Air with more of its seats occupied. The focus of the Ethics Act is on the benefit being conferred on the administration official

> who would not have to pay the cost of a commercial air ticket to fly his or her spouse to a location, not the cost to the state.
>
> Therefore, under current law, the Ethics Act precludes the spouses of administration officials from flying on the King Air unless the official reimburses the state the cost of a coach fare ticket for the spouse.
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> . . .
>
> An amendment to the Ethics Act would be required to enable the Governor to allow spouses of administration officials to accompany the official on King Air flights free of charge.

Op. Attn'y Gen. (September 30, 2004); *redated for publication March 9, 2007*; 2007 Alas. AG LEXIS 5. Under the facts of this opinion there was no additional cost to the state in transporting the accompanying spouse. The 2004 opinion did not address the proposition, which the proposed 9 AAC 52.045 seems to rest upon, that the offices of governor and lieutenant governor should be considered apart from other administrative offices, as a matter of public policy, for the purpose of determining whether the state receives a benefit from the governor and lieutenant governor being accompanied by their spouses or children when traveling on state business.

The 2004 opinion said that AS 39.52.120 prohibits a public officer from securing or granting an unwarranted benefit for a spouse. "Unwarranted benefits" have been defined in existing regulations, at 9 AAC 52.040, as benefits that deviate from normal procedure and are improperly motivated. "Improper motivation" means, as defined by 9 AAC 52.990(b)(4), giving primary consideration to a person's relationship with a public officer. The 2004 A.G. Opinion reasoned that if a spouse of an administration official accompanies the official on a state trip without having to pay, there is a benefit to the spouse, and "[t]he primary consideration in granting the benefit would be the spouse's relationship with the administration official and the official's relationship with the Governor -- precisely the type of motivations that are prohibited by the Ethics Act."

In proposed 9 AAC 52.045, the accompanying spouse or child would have to demonstrate that the spouse's or child's transportation is of benefit to the state. However, as can be seen from existing regulations already adopted by the department, the department's past interpretation of AS 39.52.120 regarding state payment of family transportation costs does not, on balance, support a "benefits the state" exception to the prohibition. In fact, 9 AAC 52.040(b), which is not being amended by the proposed regulations, says that a public officer may not grant an unwarranted benefit "regardless of whether the result is in the best interest of the state." Although the proposed 9 AAC 52.045 appears to be in conflict with existing 9 AAC 52.040(b), that does not mean that a court would invalidate the proposed regulation. A court may or may not determine that a "benefits the state" exception allowing spouses and children of the governor and lieutenant governor to be transported with the governor without

reimbursement of transportation costs, exceeds the scope of AS 39.52.120; I am not able to predict which way the court would go on that question.

The proposed regulations would allow an exception to the prohibition for a spouse or child if the presence of the spouse or child is required for state business or if the purpose of transportation of the spouse or child is performance of a customary or ceremonial duty as an "official representative of the state." There is no legal authority to suggest that a person who is not a public employee or public official can be an "official representative" of the state. Being the spouse or child of a public officer does not legally confer official representative status on a person, and it follows from this that if the governor's or lieutenant governor's family member does serve the state it is in an unofficial role. I would note, nonetheless, that the governor's and lieutenant governor's families do serve a ceremonial role that is much more significant than the role served by the families of other administrative officials. The proposed regulations could be upheld on this basis if challenged.

The proposed regulations would also provide for reimbursement of private legal expenses incurred by public officers who are exonerated of allegations in an ethics complaint. The Executive Branch Ethics Act is silent with respect to legal representation of a public officer by private counsel during a complaint proceeding. The attorney general acknowledged the Act's silence on this point but argued, in a recent opinion, that public officers exonerated in ethics complaint proceedings should be reimbursed for private legal expenses incurred because it is consistent with the public's best interest and consistent with the state's general policy of paying legal expenses for public officers who defend against civil or criminal allegations arising from their service to the state.[1] A court might agree with this policy argument and still find that the legal expense reimbursement provisions of the proposed regulations go beyond the scope of the authority, granted to the Department of Law by AS 39.52.950 to adopt regulations "necessary to interpret and implement this chapter."

The legislature might appropriately choose to consider the public policy issues presented by these regulations and attempt to resolve them with legislation. Please let me know if you would like a bill drafted.

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[1] Op. Attn'y Gen. file no. AN2009102807 (August 5, 2009); 2009 Alas. AG LEXIS 8.