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Get gas solution now

Lisa Herbert | Posted: Saturday, February 16, 2013 12:00 am

FAIRBANKS — Last week, more than 20 Fairbanks members, directors and staff advocated for the Greater Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce's top priorities in the halls of Juneau and around the capital city during the annual legislative fly-in. The goal — to ensure that Interior and rural Alaska's high cost of energy remains at the forefront of our state legislators' conversations this session.

This past fall, the chamber's board deemed "reducing the high cost of energy" to be its top critical legislative priority for 2013. It's no secret in our community — rising energy costs are crippling the Interior's economic development opportunities and are driving away businesses and residents across the state. Disposable income continues to dwindle more and more each year, as residents struggle to pay staggering prices for space heating and electric needs.

While in Juneau, our group was well-received in just about every legislative office when we talked about the Interior's energy situation. We met with more than 50 legislators and three commissioners.

The conversations were different this year. It was clear to me that gas to Fairbanks is something that is being talked about in all of the offices and halls in Juneau, because, as Fairbanks continues to suffer, the negative impacts are felt statewide.

What can you do about it? Support the governor's energy package and encourage the Legislature to take action this legislative session. The consensus for a near-term, immediate solution has become trucking liquefied natural gas from the North Slope as a bridge to the long-term solution of piped natural gas. Gov. Parnell's proposed energy package will provide relief to Alaska residents and businesses. The bills, House Bill 74 and Senate Bill 23, are a great start to providing gas to the Interior, and the trucking of natural gas from the North Slope is broader than just Fairbanks. As the governor said Tuesday in his presentation to the chamber membership, this energy package would leverage natural gas for smaller communities and other regions of the state, it would create a backbone for economic expansion, it would fit in with a gas pipeline plan and it would be a catalyst for private-sector participation.

How can do we get there? We must continue to have discussions with our elected officials and we must not lose sight of the goal to get the lowest cost gas to as many Fairbanks and Interior residents and businesses as soon as possible — most importantly, this legislative session. The governor stressed during his presentation Tuesday that getting gas to Fairbanks is going to require "persistent, unrelenting effort and community support." Let's make sure we provide that support

by sending letters, testifying before the Legislature and encouraging our friends, families, neighbors, customers and co-workers to be a part of the process.

Other talking points to consider when communicating with our elected officials include:

- Diesel fuel for heating homes and businesses, at \$4 per gallon, equates to approximately \$30 per million Btu.

The target of \$15 per MMBtu for delivered natural gas will effectively, after conversion, cut space heating bills in half — freeing up approximately an additional \$200 million annually to circulate throughout our economy.

- Support for a solution does not require support for a specific entity or contractor to do the work. Support for and insistence on a solution that meets the economic objectives — \$15 per MMBtu gas, available widely throughout the community as quickly as possible and achieved this session — is more important.

- A North Slope project will also generate propane that can be used as part of a solution to the rural energy crisis.

No matter what line of work we are in — whether we are laborers or school teachers, accountants or lawyers, students or stay-at-home moms or dads — we are all feeling the effects of the high energy costs. I encourage and implore the members of our community to get involved and help make a difference. Contact the members of our Interior delegation and make sure that they know they have your support for bringing home energy relief before this session concludes.

While I am the executive director of the Fairbanks chamber, I'm also a mother to three beautiful children. I desire for them to have the opportunity to live the life that many of us had been afforded before staggering energy costs began to cripple our community. I'm not an energy expert, but I know that something has to happen this legislative session, and I am committed to remaining engaged in the discussions.

Lisa Herbert is the executive director of the Greater Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce and was recently named 2013 "Top Forty Under 40" by the Alaska Journal of Commerce. Letters of support for HB1 74 and SB 23 were sent to the governor's office by the chamber's board and energy and government relations committees. They can be viewed online at fairbankschamber.org/boardpositions.