

Chuck Kopp

From: Amory Lelake
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To: Chuck Kopp
Subject: Amanda Coyne on SB 56

War on war on drugs finds unlikely ally in Sen. Fred Dyson

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As anti-oil tax protesters protested outside of the Capitol building in Juneau; as they waved enlarged \$5 billion checks from the state to ConocoPhillips, BP, and Exxon; as the chants "it's our oil," were chanted. As Democratic politicians took to the microphone proclaiming that they were here for the people, for the least of us, another bill, SB 56, was being debated in the Capitol building.

It's a bill that takes a stab at undoing what many consider the egregious harm caused by the war on drugs. This is Democrat country. But it wasn't sponsored by the politicians who were chanting outside the Capitol building. It was sponsored by Republican Sen. Fred Dyson, a staunch, dyed-in-the-wool Republican if there ever was one.

It passed the Senate 17 to 2. Two of those most vocal Dems in Alaska, two who were shouting the loudest about taking care of the people, Sens. Bill Wielechowski and Hollis French, voted against it after French offered two failing amendments that would weaken the bill.

Here's what the bill does: As of now, if you're in possession of small quantities schedule I and II substances, like heroin, cocaine, and oxycodone, you can be slapped with a felony. There doesn't need to be proof that you've ingested the drug. The drug might not even be yours. You still could be faced with a felony for your first offense. It'll be on your record forever. You'll not be able to join the military or vote. You won't be able to carry a gun. You won't be able to get a federal student loan. You won't even be able to be a janitor in a public school.

If enacted, this bill would join 14 other states to make such simple possession a Class A misdemeanor, which still can carry with it up to a year in prison and a \$10,000 fine. It's supported by the ACLU, the Department of Corrections and a bevy of defense lawyers who have long been bemoaning the havoc our drug laws has wrought.

It's also a bill that will save the state millions. The exact amount is unclear, but a preliminary fiscal note puts the savings at as much as \$14 million a year.

Each prisoner costs the state \$50,000 a year, and most of them are in for nonviolent offenses.

The budget for the Alaska Department of Corrections is over \$323 million a year, up from \$167 million a year in 2005.

Incarceration for both misdemeanor and felony drug offenses has increased by 63 percent since 2002. For felony drug offenses alone there's been an 81 percent increase.

Dyson is trying to save the state money, but he's also trying to undo some of the real damage done to people by those on his side of the aisle since 1982, when Alaska's current drug laws were enacted.

"I suspect it was those on my end of the political spectrum who wanted to posture and beat our chests and say we're going to be tough on crime at a time when lots of these drugs were getting a lot of publicity," Dyson said on the Senate floor.

"We shouldn't put you in jail as a felon if you're doing something unwise," Dyson said. "Almost all of you at some time in your life have made some mistakes," he said.

The bill now goes to the House.