

HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE  
April 8, 2009  
3:17 p.m.

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CALL TO ORDER

Co-Chair Hawker called the House Finance Committee meeting to order at 3:17 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Mike Hawker, Co-Chair  
Representative Bill Stoltze, Co-Chair  
Representative Bill Thomas Jr., Vice-Chair  
Representative Allan Austerman  
Representative Harry Crawford  
Representative Anna Fairclough  
Representative Richard Foster  
Representative Les Gara  
Representative Reggie Joule  
Representative Mike Kelly  
Representative Woodie Salmon

MEMBERS ABSENT

None.

ALSO PRESENT

PRESENT VIA TELECONFERENCE

Ronald Edward Brown, Anchorage

SUMMARY

^State Assessment Review Board Confirmation:

Ronald Edward Brown

#hb85  
HB 85 "An Act extending the termination date of the State Board of Registration for Architects, Engineers, and Land Surveyors; and providing for an effective date."

#hb123  
HB 123 "An Act extending the termination date of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council; and providing for an effective date."

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Co-Chair Hawker introduced Ronald Edward Brown, and explained the delay in Mr. Brown's confirmation hearing.

RONALD EDWARD BROWN explained the job description for the chairman of the State Assessment Review Board (SARB). He listed his qualifications for the position on the board.

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Co-Chair Hawker asked whether being on the board would conflict with his being employed by the state. Mr. Brown replied in the negative. He added that the current chairman of the committee is employed as a state assessor.

Co-Chair Hawker invited public testimony. There being none, public testimony was closed.

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Representative Gara asked how if the assessed value of the pipeline could be used to inform how much revenue the state can expect from the gas pipeline annually. Mr. Brown replied that the land assessments are performed by the state oil and gas assessor and not the review board. Representative Gara wondered what the pipeline land assessments mean financially to the state. Mr. Brown replied that did not have the numbers but felt that they would be very substantial.

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Co-Chair Hawker wondered if Representative Gara questions were meant to probe Mr. Brown's qualifications for the job of chairman of the State Assessment Review Board (SARB). Representative Gara related that the gas pipeline issue is of great interest to the state. He stressed that deciding the validity of the assessments on a major piece of infrastructure, like the gas pipeline, is a significant responsibility.

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Mr. Brown reiterated that SARB does not perform the direct evaluation of the gas pipeline property. He clarified that the board listens to the merits of the cases presented by property owners and the state oil and gas assessor, and works as an equalizing board between the parties.

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Co-Chair Hawker asked if Mr. Brown held a bias toward or against the Oil and Gas industry and the evaluation of the Trans Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS). Mr. Brown replied no.

Representative Gara asked if Mr. Brown had an opinion on the current pipeline assessment. Mr. Brown replied that, as a new member, he did not have enough information on which to base a position. Representative Gara questioned why Mr. Brown was interested in the job of SARB chairman.

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Mr. Brown replied that he has had 18 years of experience as an assessor for the state. He felt that successful work with the pipeline project could be a positive stepping stone in his career.

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Representative Fairclough gave a positive assessment of Mr. Brown's professional character.

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Representative Austerman wondered about the frequency of property tax assessments on the state level. Mr. Brown replied that assessments on the state level are done annually.

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Representative Kelly asked if the assessments on the state level could be appealed in a higher court. Mr. Brown said yes.

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Co-Chair Hawker MOTIONED that the application be MOVED to joint session for final confirmation.

Representative Foster MOVED to REPORT the application out of committee.

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Representative Gara objected. He shared that he believed that Mr. Brown had the public's best interests at heart. He withdrew his objection. There being no further objection Mr. Brown's name was forwarded to the joint session of the legislature.

#hb123

HOUSE BILL NO. 123

"An Act extending the termination date of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council; and providing for an effective date."

Representative Fairclough informed the committee that from September 1, 2003 to August 31, 2006, 426 Alaskans committed suicide. She detailed the list of cases by age, gender, location and whether alcohol was involved. She relayed that the suicide rate in Alaska is very high.

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CRYSTAL KOENEMAN, STAFF TO REPRESENTATIVE FAIRCLOUGH, told the history of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council. The council was designed to be reviewed every four years, and was last re-authorized in 2005. The bill requests that the council be extended for another four years. The Legislative Budget and Audit Committee (LB&A) put out a sunset review report in 2008 which examined how the council is functioning and presented recommendations. One of the recommendations to the legislature was to modify the composition of the council membership. The council met and made the modifications which have been incorporated into the bill.

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Co-Chair Hawker clarified that the membership changes that were made are changes that originated within the council, and enjoy council support. Ms. Koeneman replied in the affirmative.

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Ms. Koeneman detailed the changes to the council that are requested in the bill. She sketched the challenges the council has faced that have led to the changes.

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Representative Gara stated that in his experience, members of the minority have not been regularly appointed to councils. He wondered why the protection to appoint members of the minority was being taken out of the bill. Representative Fairclough informed the committee that two minority members from the house currently serve on the board. She clarified that the language had been changed in order to allow minority and majority members to choose to serve on the council, not because they were appointed, but because they have a desire to serve.

Co-Chair Hawker pointed out that the current appointments to the council are contrary to the law, a majority member does not enjoy a position on the council.

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Representative Gara maintained that appointments of minority members to committees were rare, unless it was required. He granted that the issue of suicide transcends party lines, but felt that the language protecting minority appointments should be left in.

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Representative Fairclough communicated that the issue was time sensitive.

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Ms. Koeneman relayed that the language in the bill had been changed in the House State Affairs Committee by Representative Grunenburg. He made the change because he thought the protection for the minority was unnecessary. Ms. Koeneman maintained that the changes had been made in order to allow those who wish to serve on the board the ability to do so, regardless of political affiliation.

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Representative Foster referred to page 8 of the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) Statewide Suicide Prevention Council Sunset Review, prepared by the Division of Legislative Audit (copy on file). He wondered why the overall attendance rate for council meetings was only 15 percent. He expressed concern that the seat representing rural communities has been vacant for four years. He stated that Northwest Alaska has the highest suicide rates statewide.

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PAT DAVIDSON, LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR, LEGISLATIVE AUDIT DIVISION, LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS AGENCY, explained that making the appointments in a timely manner and broadening the requirements for board positions will help to ensure that the board is comprised of willing and effectual members.

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Co-Chair Hawker recalled a past committee meeting with LB&A in which a senate appointee to the council had been unaware of the appointment. He felt that Representative Foster's concerns were valid.

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Representative Foster restated his frustration with the low numbers for meeting attendance. He felt that if the

committee members were not attending the meetings that they should be removed and replaced.

Representative Joule shared that he had been appointed to the board and had missed meetings. He said that he had asked to be replaced on the board. He pointed out the interim time between sessions can be a busy time for legislators. This makes it difficult to attend meetings. He felt the council had a better chance for success under the membership changes in the bill.

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Vice-Chair Thomas wondered if funding was part of the problem with meeting attendance. Ms. Davidson replied that funding availability had not affected attendance. She continued with the overview of the audit results. The recommendation for the four year extension stems from operational concerns with regard to the council board and not the council's overall mission. She notified the committee that in the past 4 years the council has been realigned with the Division of Behavioral Health. The realignment is a new development, and it is unknown if the relationship will be successful. She said that the council should retain its independence. She detailed some of the challenges the council has faced in joining with the division. She explained that the 4 year extension will allow any problems to be thoroughly examined to ensure that the council's mission is carried out.

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Co-Chair Hawker opened public testimony.

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SAM TRIVETTE, JUNEAU, told a personal story about the suicide of his son, Pete Trivette. He stated that in the same year his son committed suicide, 7 other people did the same. He shared that recently the school district has added a component in the curriculum that educates students on the basic issues regarding depression and suicide. He said the program has been supported by the council. He felt that the council has been effective in lowering suicide rates throughout the state. He presented an advertisement created in combination between the council and The Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (copy on file). He urged the committee to extend the council for the next 4 years.

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Co-Chair Hawker thanked him for his testimony and offered his condolences.

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Co-Chair Hawker closed public testimony.

Representative Foster stated that the rural areas of Alaska make up 10 or 15 house districts and should be better represented on the council. [NOTE: Further discussion on this issue occurred at the end of the April 9, 2009 meeting.] Representative Gara wondered why the rural position had not been filled for four years. He felt that in the future a representative from the board should present recommendations to the committee.

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Co-Chair Hawker highlighted earlier concerns with regard to timely appointments to the council. Ms. Davidson stated that filling the positions has been difficult.

Representative Foster suggested that a recommendation be made to the bush caucus.

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Representative Salmon shared his regret for having been an inactive member of the council. He gave that the meetings he had attended were not productive. He relayed that there is a lack of professional help in rural Alaska for depression and suicide prevention. He shared that in most cases the suicidal person is institutionalized.

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Co-Chair Hawker felt that the entire spectrum of boards and commissions within DHSS are dysfunctional. He recommended that all the boards and commissions at the department should be reviewed.

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Co-Chair Stoltze shared his personal experience on the council. He felt that the problem was too large to look at individual failings of the system. He asserted that the mission of the council should reach rural areas. He expressed understanding and compassion for the suicide problem in rural Alaska. He shared that in the past it has been difficult to find people interested in serving on DHSS boards and commissions.

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Representative Foster pointed out that, statistically, Nome has the highest suicide rate in the nation. The Wade-Hampton

District follows Nome on the list, and is the poorest district in the state. He reiterated the importance that a representative from rural Alaska be appointed to the council soon.

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Representative Austerman wondered if it was wise to grant a 4 year extension to a dysfunctional council. He suggested a 1 year extension in order evaluate the effectiveness of the council.

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Ms. Davidson stated that the intent of the audit was to allow the council to demonstrate its public purpose. She expressed that the council unto itself cannot stop suicide in the state, but the council could have a role in helping to decrease suicide numbers. She highlighted that the statutory mission of the council is to act in an advisory capacity to the legislature and the governor. She detailed several successful programs initiated by the council in communities throughout the state. She felt that a balance between the expectations placed on the council and the council's mission statement could be met within the next 4 years.

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Representative Austerman understood that suicide in Alaska is an epidemic. He wondered why the committee had not heard from the council during the session.

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Representative Gara stated that one of the problems with many of the councils is that they are under the charge of the executive branch. He felt that because of this some issues do not make it before the legislature. He expressed that the councils should report directly to the legislature. He alleged that in many administrations, budget guidelines can hinder the creation and maintenance of important councils.

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Representative Kelly commented that it does not make sense for the state to continue funding a dysfunctional council. He felt that the council should be composed of people who have been directly affected by the issue. He thought that this was an example of the government attempting to do something that it cannot do. He stressed that if he does not see improvement in the performance of the council over the

next 4 years, he will not support it when it comes before the legislature again.

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Representative Joule told of his experience of chairing a budget subcommittee that included this component. He stressed that because of time constraints, some requests had not been addressed. He thought that some of the work should carry on into the interim.

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Representative Joule explained that he had requested to be replaced on the council. He felt the recommendation of the short sunset extension was prudent. He commended on the work that had gone into drafting the bill. He felt that Representative Gara's concerns were valid. He urged the legislature to recommend frequent, direct contact with the council.

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Representative Salmon felt that the council should report annually to the legislative committees in both houses. Co-Chair Stoltze pointed out that it could be requested that the council hold a meeting in Juneau in order to meet with legislators. Representative Salmon wondered if it could be written into the bill that the council report annually to the legislature.

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Representative Fairclough stated that it is already in statute that the council report annually to the committee. The report is written and provided on March 1<sup>st</sup>. Representative Salmon countered that legislators receive copious amounts of paperwork that is mostly overlooked. He suggested that spoken testimony would be more effective.

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Representative Austerman recommended a possible amendment to the bill. He suggested that if one year is not enough time for the council to markedly improve its functionality, a two year plan should be suggested.

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Representative Foster maintained support for the bill. He reiterated his desire that a representative from rural Alaska be appointed to the council soon.

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Vice-Chair Thomas stressed the magnitude of the council's mission. He expressed concern for the mental health of soldiers returning to Alaska. He felt that this was an opportunity for the committee to present itself as a compassionate entity, concerned for the lives of Alaskans. He warned that the issue must be addressed immediately before more lives are lost.

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Representative Crawford asked for clarification on the 2 year plan suggested by Representative Austerman. He expressed discomfort setting the sunset in two years. He thought that the council should be invited as soon as possible before the committee to present a plan of action.

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Representative Austerman remarked that pressuring the council for timely results might be a more effective incentive for improvement than extending the sunset date.

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Representative Crawford voiced that a plan of action is different than a progress report. He shared that he had never seen the written report. He wanted to hear a plan of action presented before the committee that will detail how a difference will be made.

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Representative Fairclough felt that the council was dysfunctional because members consistently failed to honor their commitment to the council. She pointed out that there were 4 members of the council that rarely attended meetings, making a quorum impossible. Without a quorum the council has been unable to conduct business at every meeting it has held in the last 4 years. She felt that the problem had been caused by the legislative council members missing meetings and that the council was being unfairly penalized. She expressed respect for the legislature and understood that because of busy schedules sometimes meetings are missed. She emphasized that the bill rectifies the problem by eliminating 4 voting member positions, which improves the likelihood of a quorum. She offered to coordinate a meeting between the council and the committee to discuss the issues. She relayed that the constraint of a two year sunset date would have a negative effect by forcing the council to focus on reauthorization and not the issue of suicide in the state.

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Representative Fairclough advised that the committee should extend the council the 4 year sunset date. She divulged that she herself had not seen the council's written report. She felt a follow-up would be beneficial. She shared that the council website is functioning and is available to Alaskans as a resource. She reported that she had recommended a member of the Alaska Native Medical Center to the council, but admitted that she had not followed up to see if the person had been appointed. She said that a letter could be written to the governor to follow up on appointments before the next legislative session. She informed the committee that expanding the definition of the word "rural" in the language of the bill helps with finding appointees to represent bush Alaska. She likened the struggles facing the Council on Suicide Prevention with her experience on the Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault. She reiterated her concern that focusing on reauthorization could overshadow the council's mission.

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Representative Gara voiced support for changing the number of voting members on the board in order to meet the requirements for a quorum. He said that he would be willing to help draft language in the bill that would invite members from the council to voluntarily give a progress report before the committee each year.

Co-Chair Stoltze believed that it was imperative that the council be invited before the committee during the next legislative session.

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Representative Foster stated that his staff would help to fill the vacant rural council member seat. He felt that it is the job of the legislature to assist the council. He wondered if the president of the council could present a report during the next legislative session.

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Representative Fairclough maintained that she would facilitate a conversation between the council and the legislature.

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Vice-Chair Thomas wondered why there is a sunset clause for a council on suicide prevention. Co-Chair Stoltze pointed out that all boards not mentioned in the constitution have sunset clauses. Co-Chair Hawker felt that the sunset clause

reevaluation of the council is important in order to examine the functionality of the council on a semi-regular basis.

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Representative Kelly challenged the council to examine the causes of suicide in the state in order to determine what action to take toward prevention. He pointed out that men are four times more likely to commit suicide than women. He perceived that young men in rural areas, without employment or meaningful work, are lacking a strong sense of self worth, which compounds the issue. He felt that roads are needed in order to boost the economy in rural areas. He hoped that the council was looking at the macro-issues. He detailed the roads that could be built in order to improve accessibility in and out of rural areas. He hoped that the council would prove to be more proactive in suicide prevention throughout the state if the four year extension were granted.

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Representative Foster thanked Sam Trivette for presenting to the committee. He nominated Gayle Trivette to the council.

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Representative Gara MOVED amendment 1. Co-Chair Stoltze OBJECTED. The amendment changes the language to give the minority leader in both houses the option of suggesting a member to the council. If there is no interest from the minority, two members will be appointed from the majority.

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Representative Fairclough expressed her neutrality concerning the language change. She hoped to hear the opinions of other committee members. She expressed her desire to move the bill out of committee quickly so that the council did not go into lapse.

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Co-Chair Stoltze stated that there should be not partisan edge on the issue of suicide.

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Representative Crawford voiced his support for the amendment but maintained that the minority should always be represented.

Co-Chair Stoltze WITHDREW his OBJECTION.

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Vice-Chair Thomas wondered if language could be written into the bill to allow a designated substitute to fill a council member's chair, if the member could not make a meeting.

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Representative Fairclough responded that educating subbed in members in order to maintain the continuity and understanding of board issues would be a challenge. She reasoned that a stable and reliable board, comprised of members committed to the issue of suicide prevention, would be ideal.

Co-Chair Stoltze pointed out the two fiscal notes, which illustrate no new spending or increases.

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Co-Chair Stoltze emphasized that the committee was committed to helping to create a highly functional suicide prevention council.

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Representative Fairclough stated for the record that a senator in charge of education on the Health and Social Services Committee had brought the sunset clause to her attention. She and her staff are attempting to assist the senator by getting the bill to the floor quickly.

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Representative Austerman detailed the ways in which the current council is dysfunctional. He relayed his support for the bill and hoped that it would lead to the successful restructuring of the board. He warned that a future report from the council might not meet the committee's expectations.

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Co-Chair Stoltze stated that the council is subject to annual review, sunset date notwithstanding.

Representative Fairclough thought that it would be in the committee's best interest to invite the council to present during the next legislative session. She requested the help from the committee with her effort to coordinate a successful meeting between the two entities.

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Co-Chair Hawker MOVED CSHB 123, amended, from committee with attached fiscal notes and the individual recommendations of the committee. There being no OBJECTION the bill was PASSED OUT of committee.

[5:02:45 PM](#)

#

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 5:02 PM