

HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE
February 4, 2010
3:09 p.m.

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CALL TO ORDER

Co-Chair Hawker called the House Finance Committee meeting to order at 3:09 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

None

ALSO PRESENT

Brigadier General Thomas Katkus, Commissioner, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, and Commander, Alaska Army National Guard; McHugh Pierre, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

PRESENT VIA TELECONFERENCE

None

SUMMARY

HB 300 APPROP: OPERATING BUDGET/LOANS/FUNDS

HB 300 was HEARD and HELD in Committee for further consideration.

Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

HB 302 APPROP: MENTAL HEALTH BUDGET

HB 302 was HEARD and HELD in Committee for further consideration.

#hb300
#hb302
HOUSE BILL NO. 300

"An Act making appropriations for the operating and loan program expenses of state government, for certain programs, and to capitalize funds; making supplemental appropriations; making appropriations under art. IX, sec. 17(c), Constitution of the State of Alaska; and providing for an effective date."

HOUSE BILL NO. 302

"An Act making appropriations for the operating and capital expenses of the state's integrated comprehensive mental health program; and providing for an effective date."

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DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

BRIGADIER GENERAL THOMAS KATKUS, COMMISSIONER, DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS, AND COMMANDER, ALASKA ARMY NATIONAL GUARD, explained that the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs not only encompasses the uniformed members of the National Guard, but also the Alaska Military Youth Academy. Multiple instructors and assistants instruct at-risk youths who have dropped out of high school to give them an opportunity to complete high school, gain healthy life skills, develop leadership skills and learn team work. General Katkus indicated that Veterans Affairs is also an important part of the department. He applauded Director Verdie Bowen for addressing issues regarding the Alaska Territorial Guard and recognizing some of the most historical and reverend members that served in the territorial guard from 1942 to 1947. Today the Alaska Territorial Guard is considered the original homeland defense mission in Alaska. He noted that Director Bowen has recognized, paid, and presented awards and decorations to these veterans.

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Representative Fairclough appreciated the good monetary management used in regard to the Alaska Military Youth Academy.

General Katkus commented that the current budget is solid, even with all the natural disasters and mobilizations that have occurred. In the area of the Alaska Military Youth Academy, the decrement of \$600,000 was due to a decrease in the number of students. He declared that since the money was not put to use, it was returned to the state.

MCHUGH PIERRE, DEPUTY COMMISSIONER, DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS, interjected that every eligible student was taken into the program for the beginning class. He noted that when the next count is taken in October, the number of students may rise, but the funding will be for last year's number. He indicated that the department can still work within the budget.

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Co-Chair Stoltze complimented and appreciated the works and interaction with the Veteran's Advisory Commission and Veteran's Affairs.

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General Katkus agreed with the importance of the interaction. He continued with the FY2011 budget. He informed that the new Readiness Center in Bethel was coming into fruition. The \$20 million Readiness Center will house the existing air crew and the training platform for the infantry airborne company. He mentioned some early challenges with the Federal Aviation Agency, but indicated the airfield location adds security, mobilization, and expediency. The price tag to maintain the facility will be \$88,000. The Air Guard budget reflects a \$240,000 increase, which is a percentage of the overall federal monies. The federal government provides about 90 percent of what is needed and the state provides the rest.

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Co-Chair Hawker asked what would be at risk if Alaska did not provide the matching funding.

General Katkus replied that 10 percent of the work effort would have to shut down. The worst case scenario would be that the state of Alaska would lose the Wing which would then move to another state willing to provide the funding.

Co-Chair Hawker inquired about the duties and mission of the Wing. General Katkus replied that there are two Wings in Alaska. The Air Wing of the 176th flies the newest C17 aircraft alongside the active duty military. Currently the Wing is deployed to Haiti for a relief mission. The C-130

aircraft supplies life support throughout the Pacific region. The air control squadron supplies the communication link between the National Command Authority and the Commander of the Alaskan Command (ALCOM). This directs F22 aircraft to intercept Russian bombers or any incursion into the United States sovereign territory. They would also be the direct link to intercept during a highjacking situation. The 168th, the Air Refueling Wing, provides the fuel for the airplanes that perform the intercepts. He mentioned that Clear Air Force station has a sensor that performs space technology to identify objects in space that are a threat to the U. S. space station or satellites and supplies a grid that can detect any missile launches. The Alaska National Guard is critical to both the national defense and Alaska's economy and security.

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Commissioner Pierre added that not every state has a Wing, but Alaska has two. There is pressure from other states to get this group; therefore it is important for Alaska to show good faith in funding.

General Katkus added that the Air Rescue Center, run by the Air National Guard, facilitates and assists the first responder in a rescue emergency. He noted that at present there are 2146 assigned drilling members in the Air National Guard. General Katkus remarked that for every thousand people in Alaska there are 5.4 members in the National Guard, making Alaska fifth in the nation. He remarked on the smooth progression in moving the units, equipment, and aircraft from Kulis Air National Guard Base to Elmendorf Air Force Base. The new facilities are on target, on schedule, and within budget. He added that this would bring \$130 million for construction into Alaska's economy. The Air Rescue Squadron's Pararescue team will move on schedule into one of the top notch facilities in the nation. The Air National Guard's Jewel Lake Armory will be transferred back to the city, but if the city does not want to maintain the site, he believed it would be a good location for Veterans Affairs and Family Civilian Support.

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Co-Chair Hawker questioned if the Jewel Lake facility had environmental issues associated with it. General Katkis replied that those issues have been addressed over the years.

Co-Chair Hawker asked what was going to happen to the static aircraft displays at Kulis. General Katkus answered that the plan was to move the displays to Elmendorf. Co-Chair Hawker

mentioned that the Alaska Aviation Heritage Museum would be happy to work with them if they needed extra space.

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General Katkus pointed out that the only national cemeteries in Alaska were at Fort Richardson in Anchorage and in Sitka. He believed that national cemeteries were an important and proper way to pay respect to service members. He noted a budget request to secure and pay the cost of establishing a veteran's cemetery in the Fairbanks area, run by the state to the equivalent standards of a national cemetery.

Commissioner Pierre added that there has been great support in the Fairbanks community for the national cemetery. The new direction of national cemeteries is for the federal government to work with the states to help them establish local military cemeteries. Alaska's donation of \$1 million will contribute to getting the land for establishing the cemetery. At present, the perfect location would be land on the edge of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. The cemetery would have the look and feel of Arlington National Cemetery, but contractors in the local community would perform the construction and maintenance work.

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Vice-Chair Thomas asked if the headstones would be the same as Arlington National Cemetery. Commissioner Pierre said yes. He added that even though it would be a state cemetery it would be a federally recognized and affiliated national cemetery meeting all federal criteria. Vice-Chair Thomas asked who will make the final decision on land. Commissioner Pierre replied that the people of Fairbanks will make the final decision. Vice-Chair Thomas remarked that veterans he has talked with support the university site.

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Commissioner Pierre also mentioned that even those veterans not entitled to the federally recognized benefit can be buried in the state national cemetery. Vice-Chair Thomas remarked that there is a unit that provides veterans with military honors at their funeral. General Katkus informed that this unit performed over 150 funerals last year. He elaborated that the primarily volunteer individuals in the unit are issued a set of dress uniforms, given time to practice and have their travel expenses paid to locations throughout the state. Vice-Chair Thomas asked if this service was for all military branches. General Katkus replied yes.

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Co-Chair Hawker thanked the general for the services and support provided during the memorial service for Representative Richard Foster. Representative Neal Foster also expressed his thank you for his father's memorial service.

General Katkus concluded with a reference to the two magazines handouts: Alaska Department of Military & Veterans Affairs, Annual Report 2009, and Warriors (copies on file).

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Representative Joule commented that he has seen a decrease of National Guard enrollment in the villages. He appreciated the recognition in Warriors magazine of two Alaska Natives. He declared that these individuals were good role models to village youths to show them that other opportunities might be available to them. General Katkus mentioned other Alaska role models that have been recognized in the National Guard.

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ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 3:43 PM