

**HOUSE AND SENATE
JOINT JOURNAL SUPPLEMENT**

February 15, 2024

Thursday

No. 14

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Address by

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski

United States Senator

Before a Joint Session

of the

Second Session of the

Thirty-Third Alaska State Legislature

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February 15, 2024

Juneau, Alaska

The following was submitted for publication:

President Stevens, Speaker Tilton, Members of the Legislature:

Thank you for this hour and the privilege to be with you, though a day later than intended. It seems like nothing goes as planned in DC nowadays.

Yesterday was Valentine's Day, so I'll begin with an update on my valentines—my family. That starts with Matt, our youngest son, who was born on Valentine's. He's growing the family pasta company, and he regularly reminds me of the hardships that inflation and supply chains still cause. For him, it's flour, eggs, and more. Like Matt, Nic is now married—to his bride, Morgan, in October. He's working as an attorney, and they're living just a bit southeast of Juneau—in Tennessee. Verne is doing well and still has a long list of home improvement projects. My parents celebrated their 90th birthdays last year—and, as you all know, Dad is still not shy in expressing his views. My news is that I finally got a season ski pass for Alyeska. It's not that I have more time to ski, but the price was right—I've hit that magic age when older people get "discounts."

As we get started, I also want to introduce my staff in the gallery: Joe Plesha, my communications director, joined us from the Alaska House Coalition. Grace Kubitz, my legislative assistant for rural and community development, is also my liaison for the legislature and worked for Representative Fields. Cassidy Hobbs, also a legislative assistant, has returned to my office from the University to lead our work on health care and mental health. Anna Powers has come back to my team as professional staff on the Indian Affairs Committee, where she focuses on housing and homelessness. And, Kara Hollatz is doing a fabulous job as my regional director here in Juneau. Much of my team is in town to hear what you're working on and how we can help. If you'd like to meet, let Grace know, and we'll come find you.

In keeping with the theme of the week, I also have some professional valentines to hand out—for things you've done, that I appreciate, over the past year. First is Senator Stevens, the legislature's best playwright. I went to see his play, Uncle Ted, at Cyrano's in Anchorage—what a great tribute to a great man.

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The next is for Senator Giessel, Representative Saddler, and Representative Johnson, for returning to the legislature to continue your service to Alaska.

To the freshman class, the largest in 20 years, thank you for your genuine focus on bipartisanship—and Representative Gray, for helping to set that tone. Senator Bjorkman and Representative Sumner, thank you for your lumber grading bill, and Representative McCabe, for your focus on the Alaska Railroad.

President Stevens and Speaker Tilton, thank you for tabbing energy as a priority. We don't need more of a reminder than the impacts those subzero temperatures recently had across the state.

The reality is that I could find a reason to credit most of you for something you did over the past year. And on that note, I want to thank all of you for unanimously passing a resolution in support of the Willow Project. The Willow resolution helped us.

Representative Baker's resolution opposing BLM's rule to lock down our petroleum reserve, which may be the most damaging of the dozens of actions the Biden administration has taken against Alaska, helps us.

Senator Dunbar's resolution, supporting my legislation to amend ANCSA to free up land in Native communities, helps us. So thank you for weighing in, and keep those resolutions—especially the unanimous ones—coming.

There are also individuals beyond the legislature who deserve our recognition. Among them, I want to single out Dr. Anne Zink, who is stepping down from her role as Alaska's Chief Medical Officer, for her years of leadership and for saving lives across our state during the pandemic.

I also want to recognize my partners in the delegation, Dan and Mary. I don't know what exactly they'll say, when they address you, but what I hope you'll hear is how hard they work, how deeply they care, and how well we work together. A good example is fisheries. You know the Treasury Department is finally closing loopholes in U.S. sanctions

that allow Russia to dump its overharvested seafood into our markets. Treasury's announcement is unequivocally good for us, at a time when so much is unequivocally bad for our fisheries. But it didn't just happen. Dan led the delegation charge, pushing for months until the announcement was made. Mary helped push that with the administration, and she's worked tirelessly to educate her House colleagues about our fisheries and our resources. She may be one of 435, but she stands out, and she, too, is making a difference for Alaska. Fisheries are hard and only getting harder. But when you step back and look at things, there's a lot going well in our state right now.

Willow and Pikka are both on track. That's great not just for TAPS, but for hardworking Alaskans, our economy, and our budget. Graphite One has received a major award from the Department of Defense as it seeks to develop North America's largest deposit of natural graphite. Tourism is back above pre-pandemic levels. Then there's our investments in infrastructure. More than \$7.2 billion has been announced for Alaska under our bipartisan infrastructure law—the most per capita in the nation. Nearly \$2 billion is headed our way for broadband, as we seek to connect every community to high-speed internet. We've secured 10 percent of national funding for ports and harbors, benefitting communities like Anchorage, Adak, Cordova, Nome, and Yakutat. A total of \$416 million, and counting, for our Alaska Marine Highway System. Our Railbelt utilities will receive \$216 million from the Department of Energy to modernize Southcentral's electric grid. Beyond infrastructure, I've secured \$170 million to begin the long overdue cleanup of ANCSA contaminated lands.

At the request of Alaska communities, I've now funded more than 200 projects through the congressionally directed spending process—from nursing education at UAA, to the renovation of the emergency room at the Alaska Native Medical Center, to the expansion of the Fairbanks Senior Center and housing for Alaska State Troopers. We've boosted our ability to host the military, through strategic investments in everything from barracks to runways to the Arctic Angels of the 11th Airborne. That's helped our construction industry through some lean years, while positioning Alaska perfectly for the next generation of assets and platforms.

We're also putting ourselves on the map as an Arctic capital. We're building infrastructure, like the deepwater port in Nome. We're establishing institutions like the Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies and UAA's Homeland Security Center of Excellence. Now I'm pushing to ensure the commitments made to us on icebreakers are kept and for an Arctic Ambassador—our own Dr. Mike Sfraga—to be confirmed. There's more hope on the horizon. ConocoPhillips is hiring 1,800 people this winter for its construction activities at Willow. Santos is hiring more than 2,400 on the North Slope this season. That's over 4,000 in total. When was the last time we could point to numbers like that, for anything in our state? Forecasts show we are on track to add thousands more jobs, mostly from major projects, in the next few years.

Think about this: electrical workers helping to install broadband and transmission lines. Engineers and construction workers building roads and repairing bridges. Plumbers and pipefitters installing water purification systems in rural villages. Teamsters and truckers hauling goods and materials to the North Slope. Longshoremen and Inlandboatman workers, busy thanks to a revitalized Marine Highway System. All the while tourism, mariculture, and more continue to boom. That's all right in front of us. But so are the challenges we still face. Everything I've mentioned requires workers, and we're at 11 straight years and counting with a net loss of working-age Alaskans. Quality of life is everything—but inflation has made everything cost more, high interest rates add insult to injury, and we're behind on housing, childcare, and education. KPU can't attract a lineman to Ketchikan. The hospital in Valdez can't hire a nurse without housing and childcare for their family. We aren't taking good enough care of those struggling with hunger, mental health, or homelessness, either—roughly 40 percent of the funds I secured for Alaska to help homeless kids in school, through the American Rescue Plan Act, have not been spent.

I mentioned earlier the unequivocally bad state of so many of our fisheries. The "absence of abundance" is threatening subsistence, commercial, and recreational fishing alike. Fish racks hang empty on the Yukon and Kuskokwim. The processing industry is undergoing a wave of consolidation. Outside groups are attempting to shut down

entire fisheries and list the king salmon as endangered. So much of we thought we knew is changing. The changes in our climate threaten our food security and our economic security. I worry about King Cove, False Pass, Kodiak, and all the coastal communities that depend on fish, fish processing, and the fish tax. Just as I worry about those who are not able to fill their freezers with fish from the river. All of this comes at the front end of a divisive presidential election year, with two deeply flawed candidates set to lead their party tickets. A time when Congress is more inclined to kick the can than solve our nation's problems.

You've seen that with the budget. We passed all 12 appropriations bills out of full committee last July with strong bipartisan support, but only three of them have been brought up on the Senate floor since then. We have our work cut out for us to close out the FY 2024 budget when we return in 10 days. The latest example of kick the can is border security—which Republicans rightly demanded be part of the national security supplemental, and then refused to bring to the floor for debate when presented with our best shot at reform in decades. We could have improved our failing border policies, but instead, we locked them in for the rest of the year and potentially well beyond.

Globally, I can't recall a time when so many hostilities were flaring up in so many places. On Tuesday morning at about 6:00 am, the Senate passed a major package with security assistance for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan. It helps our allies, it sends a strong message to our enemies, and it is crucial to reinforce our domestic defense base—but it's also months late and faces resistance in the House of Representatives. Regarding Ukraine, set aside, for a moment, our abundantly clear geopolitical interests in containing Russia. That war is being fought by Ukrainians, not Americans, and those Ukrainians are giving their lives to try to preserve their fledgling democracy. Yet the outcome largely depends not on them, but their allies, and whether we still believe enough in our core principles—the principles we have held since at least World War II, that NATO was founded on—that we will not turn our backs on global bullies, let alone openly encourage them to attack others. This is the moment we're living through. Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea are looking to unseat Western power. Our own southern border is in chaos. Cartels are poisoning our people

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with fentanyl. Times like these require leadership that brings us together. We're seeing anything but that in these highly partisan times.

So to keep my head above water during this unproductive Congress, I'm focusing on legislative solutions for Alaska—and looking for every window of opportunity. One is my Improving ARCTIC Act, which will help strengthen Alaska's food security, seafood industry, and more. It will improve my Micro-Grants for Food Security Program, which has helped hundreds of Alaskans grow more food; boost food banks in rural communities; increase local food processing capacity; establish a Denali Housing Fund to build and rehabilitate housing; and more.

Another is my Working Waterfronts legislation, which offers a range of new opportunities and tools—from a tax credit for marine energy, to loan guarantees for commercial fishermen and fish processors—to help our coastal communities. We need to make all of our communities safer, healthier, and more resilient.

At the federal level, that happens through legislation—as well as congressionally directed spending, Appropriations more broadly, and by trying to work with the administration, regardless of who is President and the timing of the next election. I hope to support an expansion of the Child Tax Credit. I'm pushing to do more to address substance use disorders, including fentanyl through Bruce's Law. On the Indian Affairs Committee, we are exploring innovative solutions to address the housing deficit and overcrowding in rural Alaska. When it comes to public safety and the tragedy of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, I was proud to pass two bills into law. We now have the commission report and recommendations required by the Not Invisible Act. I thank the members of the legislature who are engaging on this with me and building partnerships across all levels of government, including with Tribes.

I'm also working to address natural hazards, especially in the wake of Wrangell's deadly landslide. As the people in Haines and Sitka can attest, these hundred-year events are now happening every few years and taking the lives of Alaskans. Our communities need to be protected, and anxious residents need reassurance. It's going to take

time to build out data and forecasting, but we're underway. I've reintroduced my earthquake preparedness bill, another to reauthorize landslide monitoring, and will continue to secure federal funds to directly meet these needs. I have a lot underway in Washington, DC. So do Dan and Mary, but we know not all of it will advance this year. Congress is ground down, and that puts some responsibility on you.

We need to work together to keep our progress going for Alaska. Here's how you can help us: Provide state matching funds for infrastructure projects—particularly AMHS and GRIP—for federal programs like Head Start, and supplemental funding for programs like VOCA. Ensure our infrastructure projects are "built smart"—with broadband, for example, reaching our defense sites and weather observing stations. Make strategic state-level investments to help Alaska compete. Ask yourself what we can do to keep Alaskans here, and attract those who might move here, but can't afford a home or find childcare and worry about crime, drugs, and homelessness. Invest in our kids' education, and support the University. We know that only about 25 percent of those who leave our state for college come back home. But 70 to 90 percent of the University's graduates stay in Alaska, and under President Pitney's leadership, enrollment is up across the board. Alaska has so much good to offer.

We are resilient in so many ways. When I was in Wrangell, just a few weeks after their deadly landslide, I was reminded of what sets Alaskans apart. This community of 2,100 had every reason to be discouraged. They lost a whole family, three kids, a great fisherman described as the best neighbor you could have. And I went there and talked to city leaders, the search and rescue team, and the people who had been cut off, without access and power at the end of the road. What I heard was, "A terrible thing hit our community. But we have one another. We're resilient." They were wearing T-shirts that said Wrangell Strong. And it was a reminder that even in the face of hard things, of sad and awful things, there is a strength and a goodness in our people.

This is a perfect year to find that strength and look for that goodness. As the elections approach, there's going to be pressure to show whether you're with the Republicans or the Democrats, with little in

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between. So let's show the country that sure, we have our differences—but we work them out, by working together and putting Alaska ahead of all else. That's how we get things done. That's how we reckon with hard things. That's how we advance projects and create jobs and establish the quality of life that are at the root of everything we need and want for Alaska. If we can do that, there's no limit to what we can achieve, and we will have every reason to be optimistic and confident about our future.

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