

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**HOUSE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE**

May 6, 2025

8:06 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Rebecca Himschoot, Co-Chair  
Representative Donna Mears, Co-Chair  
Representative Carolyn Hall  
Representative Ky Holland  
Representative Mike Prax

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative Justin Ruffridge

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

HOUSE BILL NO. 207

"An Act relating to a matching grant program for fire station construction and renovation; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

PRESENTATION(S): RURAL CAP: 60 YEARS OF ALASKA DEVELOPMENT AND A FUTURE VIEW

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: HB 207

SHORT TITLE: FIRE STATION GRANT PROGRAM

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) SCHRAGE BY REQUEST

04/25/25	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
04/25/25	(H)	CRA, FIN
05/06/25	(H)	CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124

**WITNESS REGISTER**

REPRESENTATIVE CALVIN SCHRAGE  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** As prime sponsor, presented HB 207.

AMANDA DNEMO, Staff  
Representative Calvin Schrage  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented the sectional analysis for HB 207 on behalf of Representative Schrage, prime sponsor.

FORREST KUIPER, President  
Alaska Fire Chiefs Association;  
Chief, University of Alaska Fairbanks Fire Department  
Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Gave invited testimony during the hearing on HB 207.

CAROLE TRIEM, Intergovernmental Affairs Manager  
Alaska Municipal League  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Gave invited testimony during the hearing on HB 207.

SANDRA MOLLER, Director  
Division of Community & Regional Affairs  
Department of Commerce, Community & Economic Development  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered questions during the hearing on HB 207.

JASMINE BOYLE, Chief Development Officer  
RurAL Alaska Community Action Program, Inc.  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Gave the RurAL CAP: 60 Years of Alaska Development and a Future View presentation.

TIEL SMITH, Chief Executive Officer  
RurAL Alaska Community Action Program, Inc.  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered questions during the RurAL CAP: 60 Years of Alaska Development and a Future View presentation.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:06:04 AM](#)

**CHAIR REBECCA HIMSCHOOT** called the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:06 a.m. Representatives Hall, Holland, Himschoot, and Mears were present

at the call to order. Representative Prax arrived as the meeting was in progress.

**HB 207-FIRE STATION GRANT PROGRAM**

8:07:15 AM

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 207, "An Act relating to a matching grant program for fire station construction and renovation; and providing for an effective date."

8:07:37 AM

REPRESENTATIVE CALVIN SCHRAGE, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, presented HB 207. He paraphrased the sponsor statement [included in the committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

House Bill 207 establishes the Fire Station Grant Program, promoting a robust partnership between local communities and the state to strengthen safety and security. This matching grant program provides funding for up to 50 percent of the total project cost for constructing or renovating fire stations, supporting communities in enhancing their emergency response infrastructure.

Alaska faces unique challenges in emergency response, making it crucial for our fire stations to be well equipped and properly maintained. Many fire stations across the state are in desperate need of replacement due to their age and deteriorating condition. Replacing these facilities is essential to strengthening their operational capabilities, improving emergency response times, and ensuring that Alaskans continue receiving the highest standard of emergency fire services. Addressing these needs involves constructing new facilities, replacing outdated stations with new buildings when more economical than renovation, and upgrading infrastructure to meet current safety standards.

It has been over a decade since the Legislature last dedicated substantial funding to support communities statewide for the construction, replacement, or major renovations of local fire stations. During that

period, state assistance facilitated the development of approximately a dozen fire stations across Alaska, marking one of the most well-received capital programs in recent history. However, the need for such investments has only grown. Recognizing this critical need, the Alaska Fire Chiefs Association has identified nearly two dozen projects for the Legislature's consideration, underscoring the pressing need for this program. The Fire Station Grant Program seeks to invest in the safety of all regions of Alaska, while also ensuring support at the local level for these projects. Investing in these projects is not merely a matter of infrastructure - it's a matter of public safety and preparedness for challenges of tomorrow.

[8:10:39 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS asked whether the sponsor envisioned the Fire Station Grant Program similar to other state programs, like the Renewable Energy Fund (REF) and the bulk fuel [loan program], for example.

REPRESENTATIVE SCHRAGE responded yes, like those programs, this would allow for long-range planning as opposed to ad hoc as funding becomes available.

[8:11:33 AM](#)

AMANDA DNEMO, Staff, Representative Calvin Schrage, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Representative Schrage, prime sponsor, presented the sectional analysis for HB 207 [included in the committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Section 1: Adds a new Article 6A to AS 29.60 creating the Fire Station Grant Program.

Sec. 29.60.750 Creates the Fire Station Grant Program as a matching grant program within the Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development. Allows grants for up to 50 percent of eligible projects to construct or renovate fire stations.

Sec. 29.60.760 Establishes the Fire Station Grant Fund as a separate fund in the department and provides a framework for use of the fund.

Sec. 29.60.770 Instructs the department to adopt regulations necessary to implement the fire station grant program.

Section 2: Establishes an effective date of July 1, 2025.

[8:12:52 AM](#)

MS. DNEMO offered a brief PowerPoint presentation on HB 207 [hard copy included in the committee packet]. She gave an introduction on slide 1, outlined the purpose of HB 207 on slide 2, and summarized the bill's key provisions on slide 3.

[8:14:58 AM](#)

FORREST KUIPER, President, Alaska Fire Chiefs Association (AFCA); Chief, University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) Fire Department, gave invited testimony in strong support of HB 207, which he characterized as a direct investment in the safety, resilience, and wellbeing of Alaska communities. He explained that across the state, fire departments are doing critical work with aging infrastructure, limited space, and buildings that were not designed for the demands of modern emergency response. Upon request in 2023, the AFCA identified a list of over \$400 million in new and renovated construction needs across the state. He emphasized that in an emergency seconds matter, and a well-located, properly equipped fire station saves lives, reduces response times, and protects property. HB 207 recognizes that infrastructure is just as important to public safety as personnel and equipment. He urged the committee to pass the bill.

REPRESENTATIVE SCHRAGE highlighted that ad hoc funding requests have been received over the years and its often difficult to decide which community to award. The bill would allow for a more open and transparent process. He offered to share examples of the conditions of fire houses across the state, highlighting the significant need.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT opened public testimony.

[8:19:46 AM](#)

CAROLE TRIEM, Intergovernmental Affairs Manager, Alaska Municipal League (AML), gave public testimony in support of HB 207. She pointed out that public safety and fire protection are

among the core services expected of local governments. She opined that the Fire Station Grant Program would go a long way towards meeting crucial public safety needs across the state.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT closed public testimony and sought questions from members of the committee.

[8:21:13 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked whether the program is separate or whether the bill sponsor envisions it coming in through municipalities.

REPRESENTATIVE SCHRAGE said he hopes that it would help facilitate more communication. He explained that HB 207 is designed to be complementary to existing funding sources for fire stations and would allow for long-range planning.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX observed that local efforts have not been coordinated in North Pole and relayed that requests have been disconnected as opposed to integrated.

REPRESENTATIVE SCHRAGE acknowledge that different needs should be considered, balanced, and prioritized.

[8:26:38 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND asked about the current status of funding for fire stations.

REPRESENTATIVE SCHRAGE said there has been a diminishment of state support for fire station renovation, construction, and capital needs. The lack of funding is evidenced by some of the identified needs. He directed the question to Chief Kuiper.

[8:28:22 AM](#)

CHIEF KUIPER said all efforts to find funding has been exhausted. There was some opportunity through AFT on a federal level, but capacity is limited. There are also federal brick grants and others that departments have applied for unsuccessfully.

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND shared his understanding that fire stations are fairly integrated facilities and expressed concern that "fire station grants" is too prescriptive for these multi-layered funding streams.

REPRESENTATIVE SCHRAGE shared his belief that local entities could piece together funding streams for a more comprehensive renovation. He added that whether grant program is too limiting would depend on the regulations and criteria for program eligibility. He opined that the bill, as written, would offer enough flexibility, but welcomed further input.

[8:32:01 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HALL asked whether the 50 percent match is a traditional percentage split for similar programs; additionally, she asked whether the intent is to braid funding with public and private dollars through the course of the program.

REPRESENTATIVE SCHRAGE shared his belief that yes, funding could be braided and offered to follow up on the 50 percent match.

[8:33:41 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS asked whether the list in members' packets of new fire station construction and renovated projects is comprehensive.

CHIEF KUIPER yes, the list is the comprehensive list that's dynamic and constantly updated. He added that with new construction estimates, the list increased by \$30 million in construction costs over the past year.

CO-CHAIR MEARS asked whether there is a need to cast the net wider to capture the needs of smaller communities.

MR. KUIPER responded that it was created as a preliminary list to identify need across Alaska. He added that the intent is to ensure that every community in Alaska is aware of the program.

[8:36:45 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS asked whether the Division of Community & Regional Affairs is involved in efforts to identify community needs for fire stations and facilities.

SANDRA MOLLER, Director, Division of Community & Regional Affairs, Department of Commerce, Community & Economic Development, answered no, not at this time.

CO-CHAIR MEARS asked whether the division would have the capacity to identify community needs for public safety facilities.

MS. MOLLER said it depends on how robust the program would be.

[8:39:01 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND asked whether public safety facilities and other community infrastructure is catalogued.

MS. MOLLER responded yes, there is a community database online that's fairly robust; however at present, it does not track this specific need, but it could be added.

CHIEF KUIPER said if the program were enacted, AFCA would work with the Department of Public Safety (DPS) and Ms. Moller to update the database.

[8:41:33 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked whether Department of Commerce, Community & Economic Development (DCCED) has a capital improvements list from municipal governments.

MS. MOLLER answered no, there's no database for unmet needs.

[8:44:05 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked how the funding would be dispersed.

REPRESENTATIVE SCHRAGE said as currently proposed, regulation would determine the disbursement of funding. The legislature would appropriate money to the fund, which would allow the department to provide grants of up to 50 percent of the cost of the renovation or new construction.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT said she would like to see some parity between urban and rural that's not guaranteed in regulation.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked whether the bill sponsor had explored funding mechanisms other than the general fund (GF).

REPRESENTATIVE SCHRAGE answered no.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT shared her understanding that when another state approves a capital project, they put aside 3 percent for

maintenance. She asked whether that would feel like overreach to the bill sponsor.

REPRESENTATIVE SCHRAGE said he would need more information on the structure of that program. Nonetheless, he said he was open to exploring options.

[HB 207 was held over.]

[8:49:57 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 8:49 a.m. to 9:52 a.m.

**PRESENTATION(S): RurAL CAP: 60 Years of Alaska Development and a Future View**

[8:52:34 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT announced that the next order of business would be the RurAL CAP: 60 Years of Alaska Development and a Future View presentation.

[8:53:09 AM](#)

JASMINE BOYLE, Chief Development Officer, RurAL Alaska Community Action Program, Inc., directed attention to a PowerPoint presentation, titled "RurAL CAP: 60 Years of Alaska Development and a Future View" [hard copy included in the committee packet]. She began on slide 2 by sharing the organization's mission and discussed the national network on slide 3. She outlined RurAL CAP's social enterprise model on slide 4, noting that it's the entity's 50th year of weatherization and have weatherized over 40,000 homes. It also provides 230 affordable housing units in the state. She said the goal is to run programs until local communities or leadership are ready to take that over. She shared the example of Hooper Bay's domestic survivor program.

[9:01:57 AM](#)

MS. BOYLE, in response to a question about the Indigenous Survival International program of 1984, said the program has branched off. In the early 1980s there were efforts to work on Tribal needs and connect those with culturally similar neighbors. She clarified that RurAL CAP's funding is about 64 percent federal and 15 percent state with an additional stipend from their subsidiary. Some programs make their own money from operations. She emphasized that the majority of RurAL Cap's

employees are Alaska Native individuals working in their home community, and the majority of the board are Tribal leaders.

[9:06:11 AM](#)

MS. BOYLE continue to slide 5 and discussed local capacity. She noted that a community needs assessment is conducted every two years per federal requirement. She described a map of statewide service providers in Alaska on slide 6 and provided a list of statewide impacts in 2024 on slide 7. Slide 8 showed the intersection of rural housing, community development, and family services. She shared the board's 5-year strategic plan on slide 9, which focuses on housing in rural Alaska, local leadership capacity building, and workforce development.

[9:15:17 AM](#)

MS. BOYLE discussed the housing service continuum on slide 10, and RurAL CAP's infrastructure partnerships on slide 11. Slide 12 featured a regional spotlight on Anchorage and slide 13 placed a regional spotlight on Kenai. She concluded on slide 14 with a look to the future and expressed strong interest in partnering with both the state and private partners on innovation.

[9:23:55 AM](#)

TIEL SMITH, Chief Executive Officer, RurAL Alaska Community Action Program, Inc., introduced himself and shared his professional background.

[9:25:11 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked whether the board of directors is composed of different partner organizations.

MS. BOYLE, in response to a series of committee questions, said because RurAL CAP is a community action organization, the federal government requires a tripartite board of directors to represent regional voices, government officials, and the private sector. Alaska Legal Services (ALS) always has representation on the board as well. She addressed the evolution of the private sector membership and suggested that moving forward, having large scale industry experts on the board may be a strategic option as the organization considers partnering on workforce development. She explained that the governor has an appointed seat on the board, which is currently being

represented by Kim Kovol, Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS). In addition, she said there was a demonstrated ability to work with the state post pandemic, noting that RurAL CAP helped the state distribute almost \$10 million in grants. She discussed rural housing efforts, explaining that RurAL CAP had to get creative and thought a lot about local materials, material sciences, and how to build culturally appropriate homes. She shared examples of innovation and efforts to source local materials.

[9:39:17 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease at 9:39 a.m.

[9:40:34 AM](#)

MS. BOYLE, in response to continued committee questions, said economic opportunity is a solution to changing times. She suggested privatizing traditional government services and harnessing that for everyday people in the state. Further, she discussed access to opportunity and how results are measured.

[9:50:02 AM](#)

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:50 p.m.