

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE

February 4, 2025

1:30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Kelly Merrick, Chair
Senator Forrest Dunbar, Vice Chair
Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson
Senator Robert Yundt

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Donald Olson

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): VILLAGE PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICERS AND DEPARTMENT
ENGAGEMENT WITH COMMUNITIES

- HEARD

SENATE BILL NO. 50

"An Act relating to the comprehensive plans of first and second
class boroughs."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 50

SHORT TITLE: MUNICIPAL COMPREHENSIVE PLANS: HOUSING

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) DUNBAR

01/17/25	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/17/25
01/22/25	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/22/25	(S)	CRA, L&C
02/04/25	(S)	CRA AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

WITNESS REGISTER

JAMES COCKRELL, Commissioner
Department of Public Safety (DPS)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Delivered a presentation on Village Public Safety Officers (VPSOs) and Department Engagement with Communities.

HAHLEN BEHNKEN, Intern
Senator Forrest Dunbar
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented the sectional analysis for SB 50.

ANNA BRAWLEY, Assembly Member
Representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation in support of SB 50.

CLAIRE LUBKE, Economic Justice Lead
Alaska Public Interest Research Group (AKPIRG)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation in support of SB 50.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:30:07 PM](#)

CHAIR MERRICK called the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:30 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Yundt, Dunbar, Gray-Jackson, and Chair Merrick.

PRESENTATION(S): VILLAGE PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICERS
AND
DEPARTMENT ENGAGEMENT WITH COMMUNITIES

[1:30:23 PM](#)

CHAIR MERRICK announced an overview from the Department of Public Safety (DPS) titled Village Public Safety Officers and Department Engagement with Communities.

CHAIR MERRICK gave opening remarks, stating that public safety is a priority in the legislature. Alaskans deserve to live in communities and know that they are safe and that they can seek assistance from the government when they need help. Alaskans should know the Department of Public Safety (DPS) will answer their call when it is received. Public safety is a fundamental function of government, including local and borough governments, when the population base can support it. This allows statewide troopers to do their jobs in remote areas of the state with smaller population centers and no road connection. This means

fewer mayors have suspects tied to chairs, and victims can shower off after the worst days of their lives. Public safety is not just about some of us; it is about using the resources available to protect all of Alaska.

[1:31:23 PM](#)

CHAIR MERRICK invited Commissioner Cockrell to put himself on the record and begin his presentation.

[1:31:39 PM](#)

JAMES COCKRELL, Commissioner, Department of Public Safety, Anchorage, Alaska, gave a brief overview of the Department of Public Safety (DPS) and delivered a presentation on Village Public Safety Officers (VPSOs) and Department Engagement with Communities.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL said that it has been a pleasure and an honor to serve as commissioner for the past four years. He said he has worked with the department for 33 years and remains dedicated to its mission. He credited both the governor and the legislature for supporting a team-based approach to public safety, emphasizing that the department cannot do it alone.

[1:32:57 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL stated that DPS focuses its efforts in areas where law enforcement presence is normally limited. He reported that for the first time, DPS has deployed criminal investigators to rural Alaska to address the perception of unequal investigative services. He explained that sexual assault cases in urban areas are investigated by professional investigators, while in rural Alaska, uniformed patrol officers conducted these investigations. The investigations were not conducted differently; however, it created a perception of unequal treatment. To address this, DPS assigned investigators from the Bristol Bay region to the Northwest Arctic Borough. He said this shift had the added benefit of freeing up uniformed troopers to spend more time in villages, which reduces the crime rate due to trooper presence.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL said DPS introduced a pilot program, Crimes Against Children, focused on crimes in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. It is an investigative unit with three long-term, non-permanent investigators composed of individuals with prior law enforcement experience. The unit also handles adult crimes and were instrumental responding to the double homicide in Hooper Bay. He said the VPSO program continues to grow and is vital in areas with little or no law enforcement. He said that

DPS eliminated the backlog of sexual assault examination kits, all 14,000 kits are now stored at the State Crime Lab, and the issue is resolved.

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COMMISSIONER COCKRELL emphasized that DPS targets its resources where they can make a meaningful difference. He noted record-setting drug seizures year after year, accomplished through collaboration with Alaska State Troopers, municipal departments such as the Anchorage Police Department, and federal agencies. The North Slope Borough also contributes officers to the drug task force. He said he would call these results a success, unfortunately, many drugs still enter the state. He attributed public safety improvements to strategic resource allocation and funding support. He noted that crime rates in his jurisdiction, including sexual assaults in Western Alaska, are beginning to decline, though violent crimes remain a challenge. He said the department is seeing positive trends in both urban and rural areas.

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COMMISSIONER COCKRELL moved to slide 2, Organization. He said the department has multiple divisions, with the uniformed Alaska State Troopers and Alaska Wildlife Troopers being the most visible. The Division of Fire and Life Safety conducts fire inspections and arson investigations for the Alaska State Troopers. A newly created integrated Division of Victim Assistance and Forensic Science now consolidates all victim-centric areas of the department, allowing for coordinated conversations and meaningful engagement with victims of violent crime.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL said the Division of Village Public Safety Officers (VPSOs) was established a couple of years ago to strengthen the program. Previously, the VPSO program was managed within the department by a command staff member, but frequent turnover created instability. By making it a standalone division with its own director, on par with the colonels of the Alaska State Troopers and Alaska Wildlife Troopers, DPS established a collaborative and equal partnership. He stated that the program has prospered over the last three to four years, growing from a low of 42 officers and showing consistent improvement.

[1:38:30 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL moved to slide 3, Regional Public Safety Officer (RPSO) AS 18.65.680. He said the VPSO Task Force formed around 2020. The department reviewed AS 18.65.680, the Regional

Public Safety Officer (RPSO) Program. He said the RPSO Program had originally been designed for the Alaska State Troopers as a lower-level entry point leading to trooper positions, an approach had not been particularly successful. The department adapted the program for the VPSO structure by creating a higher-level position. Unlike VPSOs, RPSOs are not assigned to a single village. For example, an RPSO in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta can travel among all 56 villages in that region and may deploy to other areas, such as the Northwest Arctic Borough, when needed for major events. This mobility provides additional coverage to protect villages.

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COMMISSIONER COCKRELL said due to their advanced training RPSOs: serve as mentors; review and sign off on police reports; perform responsibilities that would otherwise fall to Alaska State Troopers; and conduct higher-level investigations. He said the program has been highly successful. Two years ago, the Senate included intent language directing the department to pursue this approach, and DPS implemented it fully. There are now six RPSOs assigned to six different regions, providing oversight, mentorship, and investigative support for VPSOs, while easing the workload on Alaska State Troopers.

[Original punctuation provided.]

Regional Public Safety Officer (RPSO)
AS 18.65.680

The commissioner of public safety may appoint regional public safety officers to

- (1) provide an expanded public safety and law enforcement presence in rural areas of the state;
- (2) provide oversight and training for the village public safety officer program;
- (3) administer functions relating to
 - (A) protecting life and property in the rural areas of the state;
 - (B) conducting investigations;
 - (C) conducting search and rescue missions;
 - (D) conducting local training programs in drug and alcohol awareness and prevention, water safety, and gun safety;
 - (E) perform other duties relating to public safety as directed by the commissioner.

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SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON referred to his comment that the VPSO count had dropped to a low of 42 several years ago and asked how many VPSOs Alaska currently has.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL replied that all 85 VPSO positions are currently filled. He said the budget includes five additional positions pending funding approval. His short-term goal is 100 positions, with a secondary goal of 121, and ultimately, a VPSO in every village that wants one. He noted that 154 villages have expressed interest in having a VPSO, and 50 villages are currently served by one. He explained that some larger villages have two VPSOs to help prevent burnout. He said the VPSO Program has flourished, even as DPS faces staffing challenges with state troopers as does the Anchorage Police Department.

[1:41:56 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON asked whether Akutan has a VPSO.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL surmised that Akutan has a VPSO and said he would confirm whether it does.

[1:42:17 PM](#)

CHAIR MERRICK commended DPS on the VPSO Program, stating that when she first started in the legislature, the numbers were dismal. She said the department has done a great job and that it is appreciated.

[1:42:34 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL moved to slide 4, Regional Public Safety Officer (RPSO) Legislative Intent Language SB 281 (Chapter 11, SLA 22). He said the intent language was a collaboration between DPS and the Senate, crediting Senator Olson's Office with the final language. It allowed DPS to expand the VPSO Program in ways it had not before, adding importance to the program and providing some protection if the change did not work as intended, since the statute was originally designed for the Alaska State Troopers rather than VPSOs. He stated that all RPSO positions are currently filled, as are all VPSO positions, totaling 85 filled positions.

[Original punctuation provided.]

**Regional Public Safety Officer (RPSO)
Legislative Intent Language
SB 281 (Chapter 11 SLA 22)**

It is the intent of the legislature that the Department of Public Safety work in conjunction with each Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program grantee's leadership to improve program recruitment and retention, to provide greater spending flexibility, and to identify regional training opportunities.

The Department should refine the standards of VPSOs to expand upon eligibility and better define essential functions and other responsibilities that distinguish varying support of village public safety needs.

The Department shall work with grantees to utilize grant funds and/or contributions from tribal governments, local governments, and regional Native Corporations to support hiring and retention incentives.

[1:43:32 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR asked how many RPSOs there are and whether they are recruited from within the VPSO Program as a form of career progression.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL replied that all RPSOs were recruited from within the VPSO ranks, making it a progression opportunity. He said DPS has six RPSOs in six different regions of the state, with the most recent addition being the Copper River Native Association in the Copper River Basin.

[1:44:33 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL moved to slide 5, Alaska Law Enforcement Training (ALET) Academy. He noted that all VPSOs attend the Alaska Department of Public Safety Training Academy in Sitka and their program is tailored to the VPSO curriculum. He said there are currently seven VPSOs in training. While many assume VPSOs only perform law enforcement work, they also handle search and rescue, emergency medical services, fire training and firefighting, and even tasks such as responding to dog complaints. He described VPSOs as the "Swiss Army Knife" of law enforcement due to the wide range of services they provide.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL emphasized their critical role in responding to cases involving missing or murdered Indigenous persons, often serving as the first responders on scene, coordinating searches, and initiating contact with the Alaska State Troopers. VPSOs train alongside troopers and municipal

officers for part of the academy. He said the program has been very successful and continues to produce highly professional VPSOs.

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COMMISSIONER COCKRELL moved to slide 6, VPSO Grantee Regions. The VPSO Program is funded in part through grants DPS provides to the following 10 grantee regions:

[Original punctuation provided.]

VPSO Grantee Regions

- Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association - APIA
- Association of Village Council Presidents - AVCP
- Bristol Bay Native Association - BBNA
- Central Council Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska - CCTHITA
- Chugachmiut
- Copper River Native Association - CRNA
- Kawerak, Inc. - KAWE
- Kodiak Area Native Association - KANA
- Northwest Arctic Borough
- Tanana Chiefs Conference - TCC

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COMMISSIONER COCKRELL explained that VPSOs are not State employees. They work for the grant recipient organizations, which are typically nonprofit corporations except for the Northwest Arctic Borough, which has its own village public safety officer program. The grantee organization provides benefits such as health care and retirement, while the DPS grants fund salaries, uniforms, and equipment. He said this structure is unusual, and he is unaware of any other state with a similar approach. Representatives from other countries have studied Alaska's model due to its uniqueness and applicability to rural areas.

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COMMISSIONER COCKRELL stated that the VPSO Program began in 1978 and has evolved alongside changes in society, the department, and the troopers. He likened the trooper-VPSO relationship to a marriage, where there may be disagreements but both work toward the same goals. He emphasized that when a VPSO is present in a village, sexual assault cases are more likely to proceed to trial as the VPSO can secure the scene, preserve evidence, and detain the suspect. He said communities with responsive law enforcement tend to thrive, whereas those without it often appear neglected, noting that visible disorder such as abandoned vehicles or trash can signal the absence of a consistent law enforcement presence.

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COMMISSIONER COCKRELL moved to slide 7, Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) Division:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) Division

Accomplishments

- 50% growth FY2021 to FY2025
- Implementation of Regional Public Safety Officer (RSPO) program
- 80% VPSO graduation rate and retention rate

Program Status

\$22,337.5 awarded in FY25
(\$ in thousands)

10 grantees,
agreements with 156 villages

85 VPSOs in 65 communities

Challenges

Funding Limitations

Strain on Division Staffing

Recruitment and Retention

[1:49:28 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL said he believes the relatively low VPSO turnover rate, about 30 percent, is due to the strong support of the program. He noted that VPSO turnover is not high compared to other law enforcement agencies. A decent hourly wage and housing are critical to VPSO retention; VPSOs start between \$38 and \$40 per hour and decent housing remains a challenge. He emphasized

that when VPSOs are given the necessary tools and are accepted by the village as one of their own, there is a noticeable improvement in how the community is policed. He said most of these communities lack a 911 system. Calls are routed to a trunk line in Fairbanks that have no data information; therefore, the presence of a VPSO makes a significant difference in rural communities. Without a VPSO or state trooper, residents are often left on their own in emergencies.

[1:50:36 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL referenced slide 7 which indicates that the VPSO budget is about \$22.3 million, has agreements with 156 villages, and 85 VPSOs. He stressed the importance of sustained support for the program. He said the program has grown so quickly that the Anchorage-based staff managing it are overwhelmed, an issue DPS will need to address. Infrastructure, especially adequate housing in rural Alaska, remains a persistent challenge. Recruitment for the VPSO Program is strong, and retention is better than in many other departments. He concluded by expressing pride in the direction set by the VPSO Division director and in the support shown by the administration and legislature. He said Alaska still has gaps in law enforcement coverage, but the VPSO Program is helping to close them.

[1:52:13 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL moved to slide 8 and showed a brief video, which said:

The Village Public Safety Officer Program was developed in 1979 to address safety in rural Alaska with predominantly Alaska Native communities. Tribes and local government work in partnership with the Department of Public Safety to hire, train, and manage VPSOs in their communities. Training alongside the Alaska State Troopers, VPSOs learn skills critical to protecting and serving rural Alaskans, such as lifesaving emergency medical care, search and rescue, community policing, and fire prevention and suppression. Hazardous weather and long distances mean they are often the first and sometimes only responders on the scene, coordinating with the community and partner agencies to ensure safety and security. VPSOs are vital to the well-being of rural Alaska.

[1:53:53 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL moved to slide 9, Collaboration, Village Public Safety Officers and Tribal Liaisons. He said he would not know what DPS would do without the VPSO Program in rural Alaska and emphasized his desire to grow it. He noted that many communities could benefit from a VPSO. He reported that Selawik experienced a homicide of an adult female the previous weekend, which is not an unusual type of call for DPS. Response was delayed because the department did not have an airplane available, but ultimately a trooper and VPSO arrived on scene to handle the situation. He also referenced a double homicide in Hooper Bay. While in many cases it is no secret who committed a crime, the Hooper Bay case was a "whodunnit" with no immediate suspect. The Department of Law devoted significant effort to holding the offender accountable, describing the incident as heinous. He stated that DPS must police for Alaska; state troopers and VPSOs must respond to calls regardless of how they get there or the resources available, because bad crimes happen.

[1:55:25 PM](#)

CHAIR MERRICK asked the commissioner to talk about how troopers and local law enforcement collaborate and resolve conflicts, and what actions the legislature can take to ensure law enforcement fulfills its mission.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL replied that is a big question. He said the department frequently uses task forces, particularly for drug investigations, which often involve multiple law enforcement agencies, such as the Southeast Alaska Cities Against Drugs Task Force (SEACAD). He described this as a force multiplier, noting that the department could not seize the volume of drugs it does without task force officers from federal, state, and municipal agencies. The Anchorage Police Department is heavily involved, as is the North Slope Borough, which is heavily impacted by drug-related issues.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL said each detachment commander maintains regular communication with local police chiefs. For example, the Palmer detachment commander coordinates with the Palmer and Wasilla police chiefs. At a higher level, DPS participates in biweekly meetings and in Anchorage that includes federal and Anchorage police leadership. He stated that, due to the frequent overlap in operations, the department spends considerable time collaborating with other agencies whether they operate in DPS's jurisdiction or not.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL described these relationships as generally healthy, acknowledging that there may be ups and downs depending

on leadership style. He emphasized that DPS could not operate effectively without partner agencies, and those agencies could not operate as effectively without DPS. He said the Alaska State Troopers never turn down requests for specialized assistance, whether investigating officer involved shootings, such as recent cases in Juneau and Sitka, or "whodunnit" homicides for agencies without prior homicide investigation experience. He said DPS will send resources anywhere in the state when needed.

[1:58:36 PM](#)

CHAIR MERRICK observed that some areas of the state have a tax base that could possibly support their own law enforcement but rely on state troopers instead. She suggested that local participation could free up officers to serve in rural areas and asked the commissioner whether he would like to comment on this.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL replied that there have been discussions about whether boroughs should police their own areas. He said most do not have a charter granting police powers. He expressed his belief that the North Slope, Bristol Bay, and Haines Boroughs do. The Matanuska-Susitna Borough once explored establishing a police department or sheriff's office. He said contracting law enforcement is another option, noting he explored this as a colonel when troopers were removed from Girdwood due to budget cuts. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police contract most of their services in more rural areas, and the Yukon's tenth-year evaluation of this model was positive.

[2:00:58 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL said there are law enforcement agencies that struggle to hire police officers. He explained that if Alaska moved in the direction of providing law enforcement through the Alaska State Troopers, the service would be consistent, and communities would not have to establish their own police department or hire a chief of police. This could offset some costs if additional troopers were desired in a region. He stated this is a difficult issue, because people want more law enforcement, but the question is how to do it affordably. A few small departments are struggling to maintain a police force, and contracting with the Alaska State Troopers is always a possibility if that is the direction the administration or legislature wishes to pursue.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL emphasized that he does not have the authority to make such changes, and that he would not remove troopers from the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, the Fairbanks North Star Borough, or the Kenai Peninsula, because doing so would put

troopers at greater risk by leaving them without adequate backup. He noted the minimum staffing in the Mat-Su Valley is five troopers, which is already insufficient for policing an area the size of West Virginia with 112,000 residents living outside cities but within the borough.

[2:02:39 PM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL stated that there is no easy answer and that a concerted effort would be needed to make such a change happen. He said, as a side note, that when he joined the department in 1988, there were 324 authorized state troopers, compared to 320 today, meaning no net increase in 40 years. Wildlife troopers numbered 121 then and only 90 now. He said the State has not kept pace with staffing needs in the Mat-Su Borough, Fairbanks, and to a lesser extent, the Kenai Peninsula. He pointed out that it is expensive to fund positions and difficult to recruit. He reported that DPS currently has 50 vacancies, which is an improvement from last year's 70 vacancies. The training academy recently graduated a class of 24, and there are 22 in the current class, which will reduce vacancies into the 30s. The vacancy rate must be between 34 and 38 before another class can be scheduled, and DPS must maintain a certain number of vacancies to keep its budget in the green.

[2:04:24 PM](#)

CHAIR MERRICK requested a list of the number of state troopers and where they are stationed.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL answered DPS would provide that.

[2:04:34 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR requested information on where troopers patrol or conduct investigations, not only where they are stationed. He noted that, during his time on the Anchorage Assembly, the closure of the Girdwood Station caused concern because no law enforcement patrolled the area. Anchorage funded patrols along the State highway from Potter Marsh to Girdwood and beyond, an area now covered by the Anchorage Police Department (APD). He said the situation continues to rankle Anchorage residents, who feel they lack trooper support while Anchorage subsidizes neighboring communities that drive in and out of its municipality. He asked if this perception is unfair on the part of leadership in Anchorage.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL disagreed with that perception. He stated that the Municipality of Anchorage sets its own boundaries and determines whether to include a State highway. He said the

situation is similar to the Glenn Highway, which APD patrols within the city. He questioned why Anchorage would not be responsible for Girdwood and that region up to milepost 75 of the Seward Highway.

[2:06:06 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR asked whether the Mat-Su Borough patrols State roads through its borough.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL replied that it is likely only within Palmer city limits, noting the Mat-Su Borough lacks a law enforcement charter.

SENATOR DUNBAR said he was not singling out the Mat-Su Borough, but believed Anchorage is the only borough that patrols outside its city proper.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL maintained that Anchorage is responsible for the region because it is the largest city in the state, has more than 400 police officers, and set its own boundaries. He said Anchorage should own up on it and police it.

[2:06:52 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR asked whether other regions should conduct policing and investigations within their boundaries, noting that APD investigates in those areas too. He asked whether the department relies on state troopers for investigations in Anchorage.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL replied that troopers occasionally assist, citing the serial killer case, gang-related auto thefts, and the arrest of a suspect who shot two correctional officers. He said DPS provides resources to APD and will always respond to requests for assistance, regardless of jurisdiction or agency size.

[2:07:57 PM](#)

SENATOR YUNDT said the Wasilla Police Department and Palmer Police both patrol State highways. He expressed gratitude to the commissioner for the department's help at the Anchorage airport and for the work DPS does.

[2:08:26 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON expressed appreciation to all of Alaska's public safety officers, state troopers, and VPSOs for protecting the state's communities.

[2:09:04 PM](#)

At ease.

SB 50-MUNICIPAL COMPREHENSIVE PLANS: HOUSING

[2:10:25 PM](#)

CHAIR MERRICK reconvened the meeting and announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 50 "An Act relating to the comprehensive plans of first and second class boroughs."

[2:10:43 PM](#)

SENATOR FORREST DUNBAR, District J, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, speaking as sponsor of SB 50, introduced himself.

[2:10:46 PM](#)

HAHLEN BEHNKEN, Intern, Senator Forrest Dunbar, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, introduced himself.

[2:10:53 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR spoke to the motivation behind SB 50, noting the ongoing housing crisis in Alaska and the shortage of housing construction. He said housing has become prohibitively expensive in Anchorage and across the state. While there is no single solution, SB 50 is intended as a positive step toward increasing housing supply.

SENATOR DUNBAR stated that SB 50 amends AS 29.40.030(a), which outlines elements for comprehensive plans in first and second class boroughs and home rule municipalities. Current law lists four elements: a statement of policies, goals, and standards; a land use plan; a community facilities plan; and a transportation plan. SB 50 adds a housing plan to the list. He said SB 50 would not place current plans out of compliance or require communities to affirmatively change their plans. The idea is that the next time a community submits a comprehensive plan, it will include the housing element. He noted that the Alaska Municipal League (AML) does not oppose the bill.

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SENATOR DUNBAR referred to Section 1, page 1, lines 6-7, noting that Legislative Legal Services deleted the phrase ", BUT IS NOT LIMITED TO," because it was superfluous; in other words, "may include" has the same effect as the deleted phrase. He said two organizations, including AML, expressed concern that the deleted phrase could be misinterpreted as a limitation. He stated that

he will seek to restore the language in a committee substitute to ensure clarity.

[2:14:11 PM](#)

CHAIR MERRICK asked how often comprehensive plans are updated.

SENATOR DUNBAR responded that he did know and deferred to an invited testifier, Ms. Brawley, who is a planner by trade.

[2:14:35 PM](#)

MR. BEHNKEN presented the following sectional analysis for SB 50:

SECTIONAL ANALYSIS

SB 50: MUNICIPAL COMPREHENSIVE PLANS: HOUSING

Section 1. AS 29.40.030(a): Adds a new subsection 5 to AS 29.40.030(a) stating that a housing plan will now be one of the components that may be included in a comprehensive plan. It redesignates the former subsection 5 as subsection 6. Removes redundant language on line 6.

[2:15:00 PM](#)

CHAIR MERRICK announced invited testimony on SB 50.

[2:15:19 PM](#)

ANNA BRAWLEY, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, testified by invitation in support of SB 50. She said she is a member of the Anchorage Assembly, but for purposes of this testimony is speaking in a role related to housing policy and as a planning professional. She gave the following testimony, as paraphrased:

I support Senate Bill 50 because it connects two important roles for local government: taking action on community needs, like housing, and engaging with the community to create a vision and set clear goals to achieve that vision. That is the essence of planning. There is already a process in place in our statutes for this function, it is known as a comprehensive plan. Comprehensive plans are intended to be big-picture, wide-ranging plans that cover a number of topics. They give a 20-year roadmap for communities to implement. They are both a process and a product, and when done well, they build community consensus for who they want to be, with practical strategies to get there.

[2:16:23 PM](#)

MS. BRAWLEY continued her testimony on SB 50:

I will briefly answer a previously posed question about updating a community plan. In statute, the cycle of updating a community plan is about 20 years. Of course, that is sometimes aspirational. For example, my friends in Girdwood have been working to update their plan, which was adopted in 1995. Now, in 2025, the update is still in progress, not for lack of trying. Sometimes it takes a while to get committee consensus.

Planners can easily list off the big topics that are in a typical comprehensive plan: land use, transportation, infrastructure, economic development, public lands and facilities, and other issues. However, it is sometimes hard to see where housing, as an issue, fits in. Is it a land use issue? An infrastructure issue? A workforce issue? Often, it's all of the above. It intersects with many topics, but it is also a distinct and different topic on its own. Given the challenges we face today across the state, it deserves local attention and local solutions.

[2:17:21 PM](#)

MS. BRAWLEY continued her testimony on SB 50:

In my experience as a planning consultant, communities updating their comprehensive plans should engage residents to set direction, and manage pressing issues and competing priorities. It is hard to give every topic the attention it deserves. Elevating housing is an important topic, distinct from these other topics. It encourages communities to make housing a local planning priority. Some communities have updated their plans recently and taken on housing. One example is my former client, the City of Valdez. Valdez engaged in a comprehensive plan update that identified housing as a top priority. The city used current data to inform their next steps and their plans, and built community support for those plans. I was not involved in creating their plan. However, I was proud to help support an implementation project and public process for that key priority to update the city's zoning code to help meet future housing demand. We should commend

communities like Valdez for their planning and commitment to action, and encourage all communities to take up the topic of housing and build support for local solutions to their housing issues.

2:18:30 PM

MS. BRAWLEY continued her testimony on SB 50:

It is also important to emphasize that SB 50 encourages, not mandates, how communities engage in housing work or planning. Comprehensive plans are required, but what they look like and what directions the communities choose to pursue are left to the local level. It can look like:

- creating a whole new plan, which is what Girdwood did;
- updating data and demographic trends to match current conditions;
- an additional plan that is adopted as part of the comprehensive plan,
- re-prioritizing the strategy of an existing plan to indicate where the local government wants to focus efforts.

SB 50 is not a mandate but a positive call for local planning, and local action on housing. I encourage the committee to support this bill.

2:19:35 PM

CLAIRE LUBKE, Economic Justice Lead, Alaska Public Interest Research Group (AKPIRG), Anchorage, Alaska, testified by invitation in support of SB 50 and offered the following statement, as paraphrased:

AKPIRG is the only nonprofit consumer advocacy and research organization in Alaska. We work across five issue areas: language access, energy democracy, broadband equity, good government, and economic justice. At AKPIRG, we strive to point out where powerful or monied interests are overrepresented in decisions that impact everybody. Very few things impact as many people as housing. I'm sure each of you on this committee recognizes that the rising cost of

housing and housing development are burdening communities across Alaska.

In the case of housing, it's not a private entity that has failed the public interest. Rather, we're experiencing a lack of leadership and a lack of process.

[2:20:39 PM](#)

MS. LUBKE continued her testimony on SB 50:

Over the last year and a half, AKPIRG has worked closely with abundant housing advocates in Anchorage. To us, "abundant housing" means safe and financially attainable housing options for people across the socioeconomic spectrum. It means reasonable housing options for people of different lifestyles and life phases, including single adults, intergenerational households, families, empty-nesters, elders who want to age in place, and so on - all of the members of our communities.

In Anchorage, abundant housing advocates have rallied around removing barriers to multifamily housing development, including the simplification of residential zoning. In our experience working alongside these advocates, it became apparent that housing needs and priorities can get lost in other aspects of the comprehensive plan.

[2:21:32 PM](#)

MS. LUBKE continued her testimony on SB 50:

AKPIRG supports SB 50 because it invites communities to create a strategy that specifically addresses housing. This, in turn, makes it easier for the public to engage with their vision for the community and helps prevent public dialogue from becoming mired in piecemeal land use decisions.

Barriers and solutions to abundant housing will vary from community to community, which is why local engagement is so important. SB 50 is a step in the right direction for developing leadership and public engagement around one of the most pressing issues across Alaska. Thank you again for considering my

testimony today, and I ask for your support on Senate Bill 50.

[2:22:25 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR offered a closing statement, stating he spoke with the Division of Community and Regional Affairs (DCRA) about SB 50 and Title 29. The division is in the initial discussion stages of a wide-ranging Title 29 rewrite. DCRA has relatively limited staff, so it will take a number of years for the rewrite to actually happen. He informed that DCRA has not expressed opposition to the bill. He said SB 50 is one small specific piece that has urgency, that is to say, housing is an urgent issue for constituents statewide. He expressed appreciation to the committee for hearing the bill.

[SB 50 was held in committee.]

[2:23:45 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Merrick adjourned the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting at 2:23 p.m.