

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE STATE AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE

April 15, 2025

3:33 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Scott Kawasaki, Chair
Senator Jesse Bjorkman, Vice Chair
Senator Bill Wielechowski
Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson
Senator Robert Yundt

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 34

"An Act relating to the duration of a regular session of the legislature."

- MOVED SB 34 OUT OF COMMITTEE

SENATE BILL NO. 120

"An Act establishing the Alaska Climate Change Emergency Response Commission; and relating to the powers and duties of the Alaska Climate Change Emergency Response Commission."

- MOVED CSSB 120 (STA) OUT OF COMMITTEE

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 13

Proposing amendments to the Constitution of the State of Alaska relating to the appointment of state judges by the governor.

- HEARD & HELD

SENATE BILL NO. 116

"An Act amending campaign contribution limits for state and local office; directing the Alaska Public Offices Commission to adjust campaign contribution limits for state and local office once each decade beginning in 2031; and relating to campaign contribution reporting requirements."

- SCHEDULED BUT NOT HEARD

SENATE BILL NO. 19

"An Act relating to the use and possession of electronic devices by prisoners."

- SCHEDULED BUT NOT HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 34

SHORT TITLE: REPEAL 90 DAY SESSION LIMIT

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) GIESSEL

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|----------|-----|-----------------------------------|
| 01/22/25 | (S) | PREFILE RELEASED 1/10/25 |
| 01/22/25 | (S) | READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS |
| 01/22/25 | (S) | STA, FIN |
| 03/18/25 | (S) | STA AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg) |
| 03/18/25 | (S) | Heard & Held |
| 03/18/25 | (S) | MINUTE(STA) |
| 04/15/25 | (S) | STA AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg) |

BILL: SB 120

SHORT TITLE: CLIMATE CHANGE COMMISSION

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) GRAY-JACKSON

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|----------|-----|-----------------------------------|
| 03/05/25 | (S) | READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS |
| 03/05/25 | (S) | STA, FIN |
| 03/13/25 | (S) | STA AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg) |
| 03/13/25 | (S) | Scheduled but Not Heard |
| 03/20/25 | (S) | STA AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg) |
| 03/20/25 | (S) | Heard & Held |
| 03/20/25 | (S) | MINUTE(STA) |
| 03/25/25 | (S) | STA AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg) |
| 03/25/25 | (S) | Heard & Held |
| 03/25/25 | (S) | MINUTE(STA) |
| 04/15/25 | (S) | STA AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg) |

BILL: SJR 13

SHORT TITLE: APPOINTMENT OF STATE JUDGES

SPONSOR(s): RULES BY REQUEST OF THE GOVERNOR

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|----------|-----|-----------------------------------|
| 02/28/25 | (S) | READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS |
| 02/28/25 | (S) | STA, JUD |
| 03/20/25 | (S) | STA AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg) |
| 03/20/25 | (S) | Heard & Held |
| 03/20/25 | (S) | MINUTE(STA) |
| 04/15/25 | (S) | STA AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg) |

WITNESS REGISTER

PAIGE BROWN, Staff
Senator Cathy Giessel
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a brief recap of SB 34.

DEIRDRE GOINS, Staff
Senator Gray-Jackson
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a brief recap of SB 120.

JULIA INGA, representing self
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 120.

ALISA COX, representing self
Delta Junction, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 120.

MELISSA SWOPE, representing self
Homer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 120.

ED MARSHALL, representing self
Soldotna, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 120.

WAYNE WOODS, representing self
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 120.

KEN GRIFFIN, representing self
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 120.

KEN HUCKEBA, representing self
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 120.

MIKE COONS, representing self
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 120.

CASSIE ANDREWS, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 120.

TREG TAYLOR, Attorney General
Department of Law
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a brief recap of SJR 13.

HEATHER ARNETT, Board Member
League of Women Voters of Alaska
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified with concerns on SJR 13.

DONNA GOLDSMITH, Co-Chair
Alaskan's for Fair Courts
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified with concerns on SJR 13.

SUSANNE DIPIETRO, Executive Director
Alaska Judicial Council
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions regarding SJR 13.

MIKE GERAGHTY, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SJR 13.

DAVID LANDRY, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SJR 13.

MIKE COONS, representing self
Wasilla, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SJR 13.

ED MARSHALL, representing self
Soldotna, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SJR 13.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[3:33:30 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI called the Senate State Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:33 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Bjorkman, Wielechowski, Yundt and Chair Kawasaki. Senator Gray-Jackson arrived shortly thereafter.

SB 34-REPEAL 90 DAY SESSION LIMIT

[3:34:36 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 34 "An Act relating to the duration of a regular session of the legislature."

[3:34:58 PM](#)

PAIGE BROWN, Staff, Senator Cathy Giessel, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, presented a brief recap of SB 34 and stated that in 2006, voters approved a ballot initiative limiting legislative sessions to 90 days; SB 34 proposes to repeal that statutory cap.

[3:35:24 PM](#)

SENATOR YUNDT asked what percentage of people voted for the ballot initiative.

[3:35:39 PM](#)

MS. BROWN answered that just over 50 percent, though she can verify and send the exact number to the committee.

[3:36:00 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI opened public testimony on SB 34; finding none, he closed public testimony.

[3:36:22 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI solicited the will of the committee.

[3:36:27 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN moved to report SB 34, work order 34-LS0323\A, from committee with individual recommendations and attached fiscal note(s).

[3:36:49 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI found no objection and SB 34 was reported from the Senate State Affairs Standing Committee.

[3:37:00 PM](#)

At ease.

SB 120-CLIMATE CHANGE COMMISSION

[3:38:19 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI reconvened the meeting and announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 120 "An Act establishing the

Alaska Climate Change Emergency Response Commission; and relating to the powers and duties of the Alaska Climate Change Emergency Response Commission."

This is the third hearing of SB 120, [CSSB version N was adopted at the previous meeting.]

[3:39:33 PM](#)

DEIRDRE GOINS, Staff, Senator Gray-Jackson, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, presented a brief recap of SB 120 and stated that Alaska is already experiencing serious climate change impacts. SB 120 would establish a commission to coordinate the state's response, secure federal resources, and ensure communities, especially the most vulnerable, have a voice in planning for the future.

[3:40:49 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI opened public testimony on SB 120.

[3:41:09 PM](#)

JULIA INGA, representing self, Palmer, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 120 and argued that SB 120 is unnecessary, calling it an overreaching bureaucracy that would waste money, burden communities with rules, and threaten vital industries like oil, gas, and fishing. She stressed that Alaskans should adapt to nature locally, invest in practical needs like infrastructure and healthcare, and resist outside climate mandates or agendas.

[3:44:32 PM](#)

ALISA COX, representing self, Delta Junction, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 120, and viewing it as a "money grab" and fear-mongering tactic rather than a genuine climate solution. She argued that Alaskans know how to adapt to natural weather cycles, that local forests already capture carbon effectively, and that outside interventions only waste money on unnecessary programs. She emphasized that the state's real needs are practical infrastructure improvements, not regulatory control over residents or expensive climate initiatives.

[3:48:04 PM](#)

MELISSA SWOPE, representing self, Homer, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 120 and creating the Alaska Climate Change Emergency Response Commission. She said the commission is costly, intrusive, and unaccountable. She argued it would drain millions from the treasury, add unnecessary bureaucracy, and empower outside lobbyists and NGOs to impose harmful regulations

on Alaska's core industries. She urged investing in infrastructure that directly benefits Alaskans and focusing on practical, locally driven solutions that honor the state's history and values.

[3:50:52 PM](#)

ED MARSHALL, representing self, Soldotna, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 120, criticizing the Alaska legislature for overreach, corruption, and poor priorities. He said the legislature has cited unchecked union funding, renewable energy mandates, red flag laws, and other controversial actions. He accused lawmakers of arrogance, ignoring voter decisions, and mismanaging issues like climate policy, while expressing frustration and urging voters to hold legislators accountable in the next election.

[3:53:33 PM](#)

WAYNE WOODS, representing self, Palmer, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 120 arguing that the commission's powers are overly broad and primarily benefit the green energy and climate-change industry at Alaska's expense. He warned it could harm the state's economy and allow undue influence from international nonprofits, calling for lawmakers in Juneau to focus.

[3:56:42 PM](#)

KEN GRIFFIN, representing self, Wasilla, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 120 and calling it an overreach that strips citizen sovereignty, wastes money on unnecessary commissions, and fails to address real economic challenges. He warned it will worsen Alaska's affordability crisis, drive residents away, and accuse lawmakers of mismanaging priorities while failing to protect the people's rights.

[3:59:25 PM](#)

KEN HUCKEBA, representing self, Wasilla, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 120 arguing that the bill empowers Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and special interests at the expense of individual sovereignty and Alaska's representative government. He criticized additional commissions, mandates, and regulations as burdensome, economically harmful, and unsupported by measurable outcomes, calling the legislation an offense to common sense.

[4:02:07 PM](#)

MIKE COONS, representing self, Wasilla, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 120 criticizing the bill as an unnecessary and costly commission driven by "climate change hysteria" and

compares it to policies in states he views as overly socialist. He argued climate predictions have been exaggerated; Alaska's budget is already in deficit. He said the legislature should focus on constitutional responsibilities like balancing the budget and protecting the Permanent Fund Dividend rather than creating more bureaucracy.

[4:05:49 PM](#)

CASSIE ANDREWS, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 120 and argued that the commission is less about protecting the environment and more about giving NGOs and climate activists a taxpayer-funded platform. She stressed Alaska's emissions are negligible globally, yet the state is unfairly targeted. Even with local members, the commission would be influenced by outside money and mandates. She asked instead for practical, common-sense adaptation rather than climate alarmism.

[CHAIR KAWASAKI closed public testimony on SB 120.]

[4:07:17 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI solicited the will of the committee.

[4:07:25 PM](#)

At ease.

[4:07:33 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI reconvened the meeting.

[4:07:38 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON moved to report CSSB 120, work order 34-LS0073\N, from committee with individual recommendations and attached fiscal note(s).

[4:07:53 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI found no objection and CSSB 120(STA) was reported from the Senate State Affairs Standing Committee.

[4:08:08 PM](#)

At ease.

SJR 13-APPOINTMENT OF STATE JUDGES

[4:09:40 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI reconvened the meeting and announced the consideration of SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 13 Proposing

amendments to the Constitution of the State of Alaska relating to the appointment of state judges by the governor.

[4:10:08 PM](#)

TREG TAYLOR, Attorney General, Department of Law, Anchorage, Alaska, presented a brief recap of SJR 13 and stated that this resolution seeks to restore balance between Alaska's branches of government by changing how judicial candidates are forwarded to the governor. Instead of only advancing the "most qualified" applicants, the Judicial Council would be required to pass along all individuals who meet the constitutional qualifications, giving the governor a broader selection.

[4:11:25 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI stated that he has heard of mistrust in the Federal Judiciary Council but not in the Alaska Judiciary Council and asked for examples of lack of confidence and trust.

[4:11:43 PM](#)

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR noted increased "no" votes in judicial retention elections. He said experts suggest this reflects broader anti-system sentiment rather than specific issues with judges. The concern has led to the creation of groups like Alaskans for Fair Courts, signaling a perception that the judiciary no longer represents ordinary Alaskans.

[4:13:57 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked whether disliking Alaska's judicial system on social media should justify changing the state constitution to fix it.

[4:14:08 PM](#)

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied no. He said the person on social media said the attorney general was doing a horrible job running the judiciary.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked for a name of the person that said the attorney general was doing a horrible job running the judiciary and asked for proof.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that he can look for the post, though numbers speak for themselves. He said the judicial retention votes in Alaska are showing a declining trend, with support dropping below 60 percent. This growing concern over the judicial system's operation led to the formation of Alaskans for Fair Courts.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI read a section of the letter from the group named, Justice not Politics:

[Original punctuation provided.]

The mean "yes" vote percentages for appellate judges and trial judges in the 1st, 2nd, and 4th Judicial Districts are consistently above 60 percent, with many judges polling above 65 percent. The 3rd Judicial District is more volatile, but still positive. The mean "yes" vote percentages for trial court judges in the 3rd Judicial District were above 60 percent in 2020, fell below 60 percent in 2022, but then rose again in 2024 to just below 60 percent.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked if the data from the letter sounded accurate.

[4:15:41 PM](#)

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that he can't cite those numbers. He noted that recent judicial elections show declining support and the top public complaint he hears is that Alaska's judiciary does not reflect the values of the average Alaskan.

[4:16:14 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked whether he and the attorneys that work for him believe Alaska's judicial system is unfair.

[4:16:26 PM](#)

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that he isn't debating policy, however he is representing the governor's proposal to change judicial selection, so all qualified candidates are forwarded to the governor, rather than only the "most qualified."

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked if, as head of the largest law firm in the state, Attorney General Taylor agreed that Alaska should have a qualified judiciary that attorneys could trust and whether he had confidence in the state's judicial system.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that he supports requiring the Judicial Council to advance all qualified candidates to the governor, arguing this returns power to the people and legislature. He cited art. IV, sec. 4, Constitution of the State of Alaska and noted the constitution sets three basic qualifications and allows the legislature to add other authority that should rest with elected lawmakers, not an unelected council with three members.

[4:17:54 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked, if under the proposed system, someone could become a lifetime judge simply by meeting the minimum years as an attorney, even if otherwise unqualified.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR answered that under the proposal, the Judicial Council would forward all qualified candidates, but legislature—not the council—would determine qualifications. He said this would return power to the people to decide who can become a judge in Alaska.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI commented that legislators don't have a direct legislative say. He asked if legislators would vote to confirm judges under SJR 13.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that the Alaska Constitution gives the legislature authority to set judicial qualifications. He said the proposal empowers lawmakers—not the unelected Judicial Council—to decide who becomes a judge.

[4:19:15 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked if he would be open to an amendment so that potential judges are subject to legislative approval or confirmation.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR said SJR 13 was a starting point and represented the governor's policy choice to address growing concern among Alaskans with the judicial system. He stated it was within the committee's rights to amend SJR 13.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked how long Alaska has been without a federal district court judge.

[4:19:49 PM](#)

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that there are currently two federal openings, with names being submitted by the committees of Senators Murkowski and Sullivan, following the longstanding federal system process.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked how long has Alaska been without a judge in the Federal District Court.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that he can't say for sure, maybe half a year.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI said there hasn't been a federal judge for several years. He asked if he thought emulating the federal system and not having a judge for the state of Alaska for several years is a good process.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that SJR 13 is not emulating the federal system. He said the Alaska judicial council puts forward all qualified applicants.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI stated that under the current system, judges are evaluated by colleagues, the public, and those the judges represent. The proposed legislation would forward all candidates meeting minimum qualifications—regardless of scores—for the governor's consideration. He asked if that's a better system.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR responded that SJR 13 only forwards "qualified" candidates, comparing it to other professions where meeting basic credentials suffices. This resolution shifts the power from six unelected council members back to the legislature and, by extension, the people.

[4:21:39 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked if the Judicial Council includes public members who are nominated by the governor and confirmed by the legislature, countering the characterization of it as solely unelected.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR answered yes.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked if there are several attorneys who are selected by colleagues.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR answered yes, three attorneys are selected by colleagues.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked for examples of when the Judicial Council has been unfair in forwarding names.

[4:22:08 PM](#)

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR said he has noticed several attorneys with stellar careers that the Alaska Judicial Council (AJC) has not passed through for consideration. There is a perception among residents that the Alaska judiciary does not represent the people.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked for the names of the [attorneys] that weren't forwarded by the Judicial Council.

[4:22:27 PM](#)

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied he would not give names because what is important is the people's distrust of the judicial system. In increasing numbers people are voting to recall judges regardless of their performance, which is an indication of growing distrust for how judges are selected in Alaska.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked how many judges have been recalled in the state's history.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that six judges have been recalled.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI stated that it seems the system is working.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that Senator Wielechowski is entitled to his opinion. He explained that SJR 13 reflects the governor's policy aimed at addressing increasing public distrust in Alaska's judiciary.

[4:23:54 PM](#)

SENATOR YUNDT asked for a clear, simple explanation of the judicial selection process, including how ties are handled on the six-member Judicial Council.

[4:24:23 PM](#)

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that the Alaska Judicial Council consists of six selected members, three public and three attorneys, plus the Chief Justice as a tiebreaker. He said historically, the Chief Justice have sided with attorney members that vote the same, fostering public distrust that the bar controls judicial selection. He provided an anecdote and said there is a tendency for public members to defer to attorneys, creating an imbalance in decision-making and reinforcing perceptions that the system favors legal insiders over the public.

[4:27:22 PM](#)

SENATOR YUNDT asked if there are three members selected by the bar and three members selected by the public, who constituted the public members.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that the three members of the public are selected by the governor.

SENATOR YUNDT asked who selects the Chief Justice.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that the Chief Justice is selected by the other justices of the Supreme Court.

SENATOR YUNDT asked if it was Attorney General Taylor's assertion that the courts have a 4-3 advantage in the seven-member Judicial Council, since they helped determine four members while neither the legislature nor the governor could ever have a fourth representative on the body.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that is exactly right.

SENATOR YUNDT acknowledged it could be seen as a potential issue.

[4:28:27 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON noted that while many emails and letters have been received regarding the resolution, none have expressed support. He asked why the public hasn't communicated approval of the resolution.

[4:29:06 PM](#)

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that public complaints about the judiciary are commonly received by his office. He emphasized that the power to select judges should rest with elected legislators—whom voters know and trust—rather with the largely unknown members of the Alaska Judicial Council.

[4:30:14 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked how frequently tie votes occur on the Judicial Council, given its equal split between attorney members and public members.

[4:30:26 PM](#)

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied he did not know the exact number, but it has occurred a handful of times since he became attorney general. In each case the Chief Justice voted with the attorney members to block an applicant, making the vote underinclusive rather than overinclusive.

[4:31:14 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked what percentage of votes were ties.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR said he would review the last 30 votes for ties and report back to the committee.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked how often disagreements occur between attorney members and non-attorney members.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that in 3-3 votes on the Judicial Council, the split consistently occurs along member type the three attorney members vote against forwarding a candidate the three public members vote in favor.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked for the number of disagreements between attorneys and non-attorneys.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that he can't speculate and will report back to the committee.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI stated that the Judicial Council evaluates nominees based on professional competence, diligence, administrative skills, integrity, fairness, temperament, judgment, common sense, legal and life experience, and commitment to public service, equal justice, and the legal needs of all Alaskans. He asked if this was his understanding.

[4:32:59 PM](#)

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that the Alaska Judicial Council's standards listed above also include criteria related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), are inherently subjective and, as a result, contribute to growing public distrust of the judicial selection process. He emphasized that nowhere in the Alaska Constitution is there a requirement to select the "most qualified" candidate; this concept of the "most qualified" is entirely a creation of the Judicial Council itself, rather than a mandate from elected officials, the governor, or the people. He said by relying on these subjective standards, the council introduces potential bias into the selection process, which undermines transparency and fosters skepticism among Alaskans about whether the judiciary truly reflects the interests and values of the public.

[4:33:55 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked where the DEI requirements can be found.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that the DEI requirements can be found in Alaska Judicial Council Bylaws, Art. 1, Sec. 2:

[Original punctuation provided.]

the Council shall also consider the following criteria: other candidates who have applied; the position applied for; and the community in which the position is located. The Council shall actively encourage qualified members of the bar to seek nomination to such offices, making every effort to promote diversity, including gender and ethnic diversity, and shall strive to inform the public of Alaska's judicial and public defender selection process.

[4:34:49 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked Attorney General Taylor if he would like the legislature to change Section 2 so that diversity is not promoted.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied, as a person concerned about the qualifications of a judge, does he think the color of that judge should matter.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI stated that the governor is free to propose legislation, and suggested he do so if he feels strongly about diversity.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR stated that the discussion is a starting point regarding public distrust in the Judiciary in the state of Alaska.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked which judges were appointed because of their diversity.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that this wasn't his rule; it's a bylaw passed by the Alaska Judicial Council.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked Attorney General Taylor to name any judge in Alaska's history that was appointed specifically because of DEI considerations.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR reiterated that it was not his rule and that he did not know.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI stated that Attorney General Taylor said DEI requirements played a part in [the appointment of a Judges]. He asked for the identity of a single judge in Alaska's history who was appointed specifically due to DEI considerations.

[4:36:13 PM](#)

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that he could not name a judge appointed as a result of DEI.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI interjected exactly.

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR explained that the Judicial Council's process is closed to the public, making it impossible to know the reasoning behind decisions. He emphasized that only the final outcomes are visible, and that secrecy stems from the council's own rules, not from elected officials.

[4:36:56 PM](#)

SENATOR YUNDT asked whether the legislature would have authority to establish a list of qualifications for judges if SJR 13 passed.

[4:37:14 PM](#)

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied that the legislature already has a list of qualifications found in statute: Justices- AS 22.05.070, Court of Appeals of Judges- AS 22.07.040, Superior Court Judges- AS 22.10.090, District Court Judges qualifications- AS 22.15.160. He stated that there isn't anything stopping the legislature from adding to the template.

[4:37:42 PM](#)

SENATOR YUNDT asked whether the Legislature could amend the process to allow the governor to select from all qualified candidates, with the legislature confirming the appointment, similar to other appointments.

[4:38:18 PM](#)

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR replied there is nothing stopping the legislature from amending SJR 13.

SENATOR YUNDT doubted that any judge was ever selected based on DEI and acknowledges that its inclusion in the bylaws could create public perception that it influences judicial appointments.

[4:39:03 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN asked about the role of the Commission on Judicial Conduct in ensuring judges are accountable, act in the public interest, and fulfill duties appropriately.

[4:39:28 PM](#)

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR admitted his knowledge of judicial accountability is rusty, suggesting the court system may better

explain. He noted there are mechanisms for holding judges accountable and referenced a past attempt involving a judge in Kenai.

[4:40:22 PM](#)

SENATOR BJORKMAN read art. IV, sec 10, Constitution of the State of Alaska:

[Original punctuation provided.]

The Commission on Judicial Conduct shall consist of nine members, as follows: three persons who are justices or judges of state courts, elected by the justices and judges of state courts; three members who have practiced law in this state for ten years, appointed by the governor from nominations made by the governing body of the organized bar and subject to confirmation by a majority of the members of the legislature in joint session; and three persons who are not judges, retired judges, or members of the state bar, appointed by the governor and subject to confirmation by a majority of the members of the legislature in joint session. In addition to being subject to impeachment under section 12 of this article, a justice or judge may be disqualified from acting as such and may be suspended, removed from office, retired, or censured by the supreme court upon the recommendation of the commission. The powers and duties of the commission and the bases for judicial disqualification shall be established by law.

[4:41:45 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI opened public testimony on SJR 13.

[4:42:04 PM](#)

HEATHER ARNETT, Board Member, League of Women Voters of Alaska, Anchorage, Alaska, testified with concerns on SJR 13. She said the League of Women Voters of Alaska conducted a 2015 study comparing judicial selection systems and concluded Alaska's current merit-based process works well. She argued that SJR 13 would undermine this system by eliminating the Alaska Judicial Council's evaluative role, giving the governor full control over appointments. The council's current process ensures judges are chosen for competence, integrity, fairness, and public service, resulting in highly qualified candidates who best uphold equal justice.

[4:45:09 PM](#)

DONNA GOLDSMITH, Co-Chair, Alaskans for Fair Courts, Anchorage, Alaska, testified with concerns on SJR 13. She refuted Attorney General Taylor's claims, that the Alaska Judicial Council ensures transparency, rigor, and nonpartisan evaluation of judges. She noted the Chief Justice does not always side with attorneys, the "best/tallest timber" standard has historical and constitutional precedent, and the current system is open for public review. Granting full appointment authority to the governor would politicize the process and reduce accountability, unlike the merit-based, transparent system that maintains high public support for judges statewide.

CHAIR KAWASAKI stated that questions regarding statistically how many go to a 3-3 tie breaker would be helpful to the Senate State Affairs Committee.

[4:52:23 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked for statistics on the frequency of tie votes within the Alaska Judicial Council.

[4:52:41 PM](#)

SUSANNE DIPIETRO, Executive Director, Alaska Judicial Council, Anchorage, Alaska, answered questions regarding SJR 13 and stated that since 1984, the Alaska Judicial Council has recorded a total of 1,605 votes on judicial nominations. In most cases about 84 percent of the time all members, or all but one, are in agreement on whether to forward a candidate. She said tie votes that require the Chief Justice to cast a deciding vote are extremely rare, occurring in only 1.4 percent of all votes, which amounts to just a couple dozen instances since 1984. When the Chief Justice is called upon to break a tie, they vote to forward the nominee to the governor roughly 72 percent of the time, giving the governor the opportunity to make the final appointment. This demonstrates that the process is largely consistent and non-contentious, with the Chief Justice's tie-breaking role being an infrequent and generally affirmative intervention.

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SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked if the Alaska Judicial Council has ever chosen a judge based on DEI.

[4:54:47 PM](#)

MS. DIPIETRO replied not to her knowledge. She said the statement about the council's nomination standards was incorrect. The council encourages qualified applicants,

including diverse candidates, though nominees must meet only the following standards: professional competence; diligence and administrative skills; integrity; fairness; temperament; judgment, including common sense and legal/life experience; commitment to public and community service; and commitment to equal justice and Alaska's diverse communities. She said no other considerations are used, though the council does consider the pool of applicants for each position.

[4:56:09 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked if it was accurate that tie votes between attorneys and non-attorneys on the Alaska Judicial Council occur only 1.4 percent of the time, and that in 72 percent of those cases, the Chief Justice votes to forward the nominee to the governor.

MS. DIPIETRO replied that tie votes on the council are uncommon, and a split specifically between attorneys and non-attorneys is very rare. When the Chief Justice casts a tie-breaking vote, they vote yes about 72 percent of the time. She stated that within the last five years there are examples of the Chief Justice voting with non-attorneys.

[4:58:22 PM](#)

MIKE GERAGHTY, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in opposition to SJR 13. He stated that from 2012-2014 he served as the Attorney General for the State of Alaska. He argued that SJR-13 would weaken the Alaska Judicial Council by limiting its role to listing only minimally qualified applicants for the governor, rather than those with the highest qualifications. He emphasized that the council's bipartisan, transparent process has worked effectively under both parties and helps maintain judicial independence. He viewed the resolution as a step in the wrong direction that could undermine the rule of law and hopes it does not pass.

[5:01:15 PM](#)

DAVID LANDRY, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in opposition to SJR 13. He warned that removing safeguards on executive power over the judiciary, as proposed in SJR 13, could replicate the problems seen in the federal system. He cited a 2024 Alaskan federal judge who resigned after five years due to inappropriate behavior, highlighting how political appointments of minimally qualified candidates can create chaos. He emphasized that Alaska needs judges with maximum qualifications, a standard ensured by the current Alaska Judicial Council process.

[5:03:53 PM](#)

MIKE COONS, representing self, Wasilla, Alaska, testified in support of SJR 13. He argued that the judiciary has become too powerful and biased, favoring liberal policies and DEI principles, rather than being independent or reflecting conservative values. He claimed the current system allows a small group of lawyers on the Judicial Council to control judicial appointments and advocate for judges who align with liberal views. He supports a constitutional amendment requiring the council to forward all qualified candidates so the governor can select, including the ability to choose outside the council's recommendations, ensuring judges uphold the constitution rather than political or ideological preferences.

[5:06:06 PM](#)

ED MARSHALL, representing self, Soldotna, Alaska, testified in opposition to SJR 13. He stated that he initially supported SJR 13 yet changed his mind after hearing testimony. He distrusts both the Judicial Council and the governor to make fair judicial appointments, citing past political manipulations. He opposed the resolution as written and instead advocates for a system where Supreme Court justices are elected directly by the people, similar to Wisconsin, rather than being selected by lawyers or legislative bodies.

[5:08:42 PM](#)

ATTORNEY GENERAL TAYLOR emphasized that his testimony reflects personal experience and public feedback, not the history of the Alaska Judicial Council. He explained that SJR 13 is a policy proposal aimed at restoring public confidence in the judiciary by ensuring all qualified candidates are forwarded to the governor. The legislature, elected by the people, determines qualifications, not the unelected Alaska Judicial Council.

[5:10:01 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI held SJR 13 in committee.

[5:10:39 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Kawasaki adjourned the Senate State Affairs Standing Committee meeting at 5:10 p.m.