Greetings Fellow Sheltered-in-Place Neighbors!

I hope that you are staying strong and faring well under what are strange and challenging times. I've spoken with hundreds of you across the district in recent weeks, and even though I cannot fix everything, my staff and I will do our best to help. Do not hesitate to pick up the phone and let me know what you’re facing.

I wish it were otherwise, but because you deserve an authentic report, this newsletter is not going to be all roses. It will be real, and it will be transparent. And in the midst of the bad and the ugly, remember there is the good. The good is that a new day will dawn. The good is that we have heroes among us that are stepping up, that we have innovators, that we have miracle-workers. The good is that Alaskans are smart and sensible and strong. The good is that what you read in this report does not have to be the way the legislature operates in the future. The good is that Alaskans are waking up to what’s happening. The good is that the power resides within the people.

Two things are essential: 1) that you know the truth, and 2) that you remain hopeful. Can you get on board with that? If so, read on! As you review this newsletter, remember that brighter days truly do lie ahead. It will take perseverance and determination; it won’t be easy, but we will be better for it. As we help one another, we ourselves are strengthened.

I’m committed to doing all I can on your behalf to help navigate our state through the pandemic and economic crisis. Thank you for all that you are doing. This is definitely a team sport, and together we will be victorious!

My Recent Focus on Your Behalf

In early March, when it became clear that COVID-19 was going to have a tremendous economic toll on Alaska alongside ultra-low oil prices, crippled tourism, an uncertain fishing season, and that families and individuals would soon be struggling to make ends meet, I turned my focus to three areas.

First focus: Garnering support for an immediate emergency economic relief PFD. It was a successful endeavor in the Senate, winning 12 votes out of 20 for a $1000 emergency PFD (noteworthy that no one in leadership voted for this). The emergency PFD was pulled out the final day by the conference committee prior to the legislature recessing and members returning to their home districts. Read “Budget...Livid” article to find out what happened.

Second focus: Pressing colleagues and leadership to establish a way for the legislature to work remotely so that we could continue to respond as needed during the COVID-19 crisis once we departed from Juneau.

This allowance would have prevented rushing through what I believe may turn out to be sloppy work with unintended consequences: SB241 was a substantive bill related to the public health and economic impacts of COVID-19 that was quickly cobbled together in the final hours prior to recessing. Because it was not properly vetted, experts lacked time to give input, those impacted lacked ample opportunity to weigh in, and because the bill essentially picked winners and losers, the state may end up on the hook for millions due to possible lawsuits.

Had the legislature established a way to continue its work remotely, this bill would not have been rushed at lightning speed. To allow the legislature to use 21st century technology, the rule to vote in-person needs to be suspended. A simple majority vote on the floor in both chambers to suspend the rule would have done the trick.

Leadership adamantly opposed the concept prior to recessing. Their reasons were weak. The demeanor of a legislator needs to be visually observable during a debate? If that’s a reason, then they must believe a blind legislator shouldn’t be permitted to serve. The danger of someone pointing a gun at a legislator to vote a certain way? Really? Weak reasons. I think it was all about control, control in-person for a desired outcome. I think too it was a way to ensure the legislature couldn’t be asked, once members were home, to meet remotely to reconsider an emergency PFD.
Other states legislatures have adopted remote participation provisions. I was extremely disappointed in our leadership’s resistance to a sensible accommodation considering the pandemic travel and gathering restrictions. According to the rules, unless the legislature reconvenes in-person, it is essentially out of commission, null and void as one of the three branches of government.

Third focus: Sounding the alarm that the planned $4 billion transfer from the Earnings Reserve Account (ERA) into the corpus of the Permanent Fund, due to occur on June 30, 2020, should be reversed. This 4-year advanced inflation-proofing was based on legislation passed in 2019. My office prepared an amendment to halt this transfer, but in the rush and distractions of the final days (see “Budget...Livid” article to learn more) I was unable to gather the needed votes.

Why should the $4 billion be held in the ERA and not locked up in the corpus where it would be off-limits and unusable? Subtracting what has been obligated, the ERA balance will be drained down to $6.8 billion (not including unrealized gains).

Considering 1) how low oil revenue will undoubtedly be next year, 2) that unrestricted general fund spending for operations is $4.52 billion (not including a penny for PFDs), and 3) that Alaskans and our economy will need PFD booster shots in the arm to get through and out of these hard times, this $4 billion lock-up in the Fund’s principle is careless and foolish at this time.

I sent a letter requesting the governor call the legislature back prior to June 30 to consider legislation on this topic. I provided statutory language that if passed prior to June 30 would halt this transfer.

Budget Passed but I’m Unabashedly Livid

The Senate passed its version of the budget on March 23. I voted for it. Even though I wasn’t thrilled with the total spending amount, it contained the important COVID-19 crisis funds as well as an immediate springtime emergency economic relief PFD and a fall PFD, each at $1000. I was aware too that a red veto pen would be forthcoming. With the virus mandates in place restricting gatherings, it was essential to get the budget bill back to the House for concurrence, and for legislators to return to their homes.

Although the House Minority concurred and voted to access the Constitutional Budget Reserve, the House Majority failed to support either, so the vote in the House failed.

The conference committee report that followed was one of the most stunningly irresponsible and disturbing political maneuvers I have ever witnessed. Although my father unexpectedly passed away the day before the conference committee vote and I was with family, I was in frequent touch with colleagues to see if I should rush back for the vote – and I certainly would have if it could have moved the needle. I am still amazed that the leadership in both bodies would stoop to such loathsome – and in my opinion immoral – levels as to put that document in front of anyone for a vote.

First, the numbers. The overall Unrestricted General Fund spending (UGF) for agency operations was $4.52 billion, which was $300 million more than last year’s budget. $100 million of that additional spending was for the response to the COVID-19 crisis. Considering the pandemic, it was reasonable and responsible to make those funds available. But growing other programs by $200 million? Not reasonable nor responsible.

That $4.52 billion did not include the PFD because it is not an operational expense. Speaking of the PFD, leadership ensured the immediate emergency dividend payment was stripped from the budget. Only the $1000 October dividend remained, an amount far below the statutory formula.

Increases occurred in numerous areas. Here is just a sampling: $30 million for public education even though the foundation formula was already fully funded; $12.5 million increase for the University of Alaska even though UA had agreed to an earlier, smaller amount; school bond debt reimbursement; additional funds for the Alaska Marine Highway System beyond AMHS’s request (please note that the earlier, smaller amount would have increased service to communities compared to last year); and community revenue sharing.

In addition, the report included a transfer of $1.06 billion into the corpus of the Permanent Fund for inflation proofing. This transfer would make these funds untouchable. Last year’s budget already forward-funded inflation-proofing by four years. This decision by the co-chairs of finance was illogical and reckless.

Continued on page 5
COVID-19 Resources

May you exercise patience and perseverance as you pursue these resources! I know that the wait times, the hoops and barriers, the hassles, are all terribly annoying. Know that many decent people are at the other end doing their best. They are inundated and overwhelmed by the vast volume of requests. If my office can assist, call 907-465-3743 or 907-376-3725.

**National Information COVID-19**
http://coronavirus.gov

Official home page for US government’s COVID-19 information and resources

- Direct link to CDC information and daily updates
- Financial Assistance
- IRS information (extension of April 15 tax deadline, etc.)
- Economic Impact Payments
- Frequently Asked Questions

**State of Alaska Information COVID-19**
http://coronavirus.alaska.gov

Official home page for State of Alaska’s COVID-19 information and resources

- Alaska Coronavirus Response Hub (COVID-19 Dashboard)
- Health Alerts and Mandates
- Travel Information
- Frequently Asked Questions

https://gov.alaska.gov/home/covid-19-economy/

https://alaska211.org/ or dial 211 on your phone

Resource for Alaskans who need help or connection to services, including related to COVID-19 impacts.

**Mat-Su Borough Information COVID-19**

Official home page for Matanuska Susitna Borough’s COVID-19 Information Hub

- Latest local testing facility information
- Essential Services Locator Maps
- Frequently Asked Questions

I look forward to being able to be close once again to my adorable granddaughter! My husband’s clinical exposure to patients means social distancing even from loved ones.

Early in March, my sister and I donned masks in this selfie with our dear mother. Participating in an early briefing with Dr. Anne Zink pertaining to precautions and projections related to the novel coronavirus.
HOW TO CONTACT YOUR SENATOR

Interim: May to December
Mat-Su LIO
600 E. Railroad Ave.
Wasilla AK 99654
907-376-3725

Session: January to April
State Capital
Juneau AK 99801
907-465-3743
800-565-3743

COMMUNICATING WITH ALASKA

@AKShelleyHughes #Telling_it_like_it_is

For occasional online “Hughes News” updates, email Sen.Shelley.Hughes@akleg.gov with “Subscribe” in subject.

UPCOMING VIRTUAL COFFEE CHATS WITH SHELLEY

April 25 and May 2 at 11am. To register, email Lisa.Hart@akleg.gov

CURRENT STATE AND NATIONAL ASSIGNMENTS

State
Mat-Su Delegation, Co-Chair
Education Committee, Vice-Chair
Judiciary Committee, Member
Transportation Committee, Member
Bicameral Permanent Fund Working Group, Member
Judiciary Finance Subcommittee, Member
Department of Public Safety Finance Subcommittee, Member
Department of Law Finance Subcommittee, Member
Department of Transportation Finance Subcommittee, Member
Alaska Criminal Justice Commission, Member

National
State Agriculture & Rural Leaders, Alaska Delegate
Conference of State Governments, Transportation Committee, Member
Conference of State Governments-West, Canada Relations Committee, Member
National Conference of State Legislatures, State Coordinator
National Conference of State Legislatures, Cybersecurity Task Force, Member
National Conference of State Legislatures, Law, Criminal Justice, and Public Safety Committee, Member

STAY ENGAGED

To follow the legislature, track bills, and testify in committee, see www.akleg.gov. Text any bill number (ex: SB114) 559-245-2929 to enroll in alerts.

YOUR SENATE DISTRICT F TEAM

Senator Shelley Hughes
Senator.Shelley.Hughes@akleg.gov

Buddy Whitt
Chief of Staff,
Buddy.Whitt@akleg.gov

Lisa Hart
Legislative Aide
Lisa.Hart@akleg.gov
Why am I livid about the budget outcome? Here’s the first reason. Legislators deemed the increases and the transfer to be more important than helping Alaskans directly. In fact, legislators opposed to providing direct economic relief to Alaskans argued that the money would be better spent through government programs, many of which had nothing to do with the current crisis.

What’s another reason I’m livid? Your $1000 dividend in October and the money for the COVID emergency came with a catch. Legislators were either to vote to access the Constitutional Budget Reserve or the PFD would be cut in half (from $1000 down to $500) and the COVID-19 funds to save lives would be eliminated. Including contingency language to hurt Alaskans in order to attain a certain vote outcome is beyond the pale! Leadership should be held accountable for this atrocious power-play.

Want to know another reason I’m livid?

The horrifying political bullying also included legislative leadership threatening members that funds for life/safety road projects in their districts would be pulled and moved to other districts if the vote outcome desired wasn’t achieved. Most notably for our area, funds for the Knik Goose Bay Road project were threatened. I am as stunned writing this as you are reading it, but yes, legislative leadership was willing to sacrifice lives of Alaskans to get their way.

That these tactics were used is a disgrace. Alaska is too great of a state. We must not let this happen again. It is incredibly troubling that my colleagues in leadership, whom I have considered friends in the past, would think so little of those of us who hold a different viewpoint or policy position.

During debate in the House, a member in leadership who had served in law enforcement said, “For more than two decades I tried to talk people into doing things that they didn’t want to do. Maybe they were drunk, maybe they were just angry. They were out of sorts. I found that many times you could talk and talk and plead and reason and persuade and try to give a person options, but at the end of the day you just have to act.”

I replay that quote over and over in my head and it brings to mind something a member of Senate leadership said last year during a joint session in Juneau, while I along with others were in Wasilla where the governor had officially called the special session. In reference to those of us not there, he said, “I don’t think my constituents are very happy with the dysfunction of a group of dissidents running away from their constitutional duty.”

When I consider these two quotes together, it is clear we have a serious, serious problem. Instead of viewing each member as a duly elected representative for thousands of Alaskans, these individuals view us as dissidents, likening us to belligerent criminals and drunkards. With this perspective, no wonder they coerced and threatened their way to the budget outcome they wanted. This is a sad state of affairs, and I’m sorry to report it. But as I am committed to #Telling_it_like_is_is, I must.

The good news is that it doesn’t have to be this way. We can do better. The legislature needs to come together to sort through differences, find and build consensus, so that all Alaskans are properly represented. I am committed to working toward that end on your behalf. It is my hope and my prayer that what we’ve seen happen this year with the budget will never happen again.

Note: A positive update: since this writing, the governor vetoed the $1.06 billion transfer into the corpus of the Permanent Fund. The governor also vetoed various amounts in the budget with the expectation that federal COVID funds can backfill most of the items.

**Trying Hard Not to Say “I told you so!”**

**The Need for Alaska’s Own Virtual Education Platform**

Recently, the Dunleavy administration contracted with the Florida Virtual School (FVS) to give families a free option as districts were scrambling to provide virtual education opportunities to K-12 students across the state when schools closed. Some educators were outraged that the governor had reached “outside.”

Districts were indeed doing their best under the circumstances, naturally focusing on ensuring high school students could stay on track for graduation. The truth is that many families were finding limited opportunities for younger students, and even some older students were experiencing gaps in needs being met. FVS provided a ready-made solution for some students.

Hindsight is a great teacher. For the last three years I’ve had a virtual education bill on the table. It baffles me that some Alaskan educators are now upset with the arrangement with FVS. If the education community in Alaska had stepped forward three years ago and pushed for the bill’s passage, we would not have needed to reach outside. We would have had our own virtual education platform up and running.

*Continued on next page*
Unfortunately, at the time, NEA and the education community did little to help craft and improve the bill or advocate for its passage. At best, they remained lukewarm; at worst, some spoke against it.

 Petty politics also played a part. Although the bill had bi-partisan and bi-cameral support, and I co-led hours of joint House and Senate Education Committees on the topic, when majority leadership was displeased with my votes on budget matters, the bill suddenly stalled and failed to advance to the floor for a vote.

With Alaskans now “hunkered down” in the present crisis, tasked with teaching their children at home, many are realizing that 21st century tools can be helpful. The question is, are we motivated to go back to the drawing board to get our own statewide virtual education system up and running, will we set aside petty politics, and will the education community get on board to help?

This fundamentally comes down to what is best for the students. It should not be about politics or power. It should be about children and young people having opportunities to learn via two-way videoconferencing with teachers, to accessing great interactive online curriculum, to expanding the menu of course topics available, to peaking student interest and passion to spark future meaningful careers for Alaskan students.

I will continue to press my colleagues to support policy to establish a statewide virtual education platform.

Thank you, Dawson!

Dawson Mann came to us from UAF: an eager and bright intern. After the first day of session, when legislative leadership stripped chairmanships, committee seats, and staff from several of us because of our positions and votes pertaining to the budget and the PFD, Dawson quickly stepped up to function as a full legislative aide and never looked back! He worked diligently with the perpetually busy Education Committee while at the same time, skillfully carried two bills: SB 113 and SB 81. He juggled the calendar, took turns in the hot seat on Facebook Live, was our go-to for graphic design and social media posts, and interacted daily with constituents on the phone. Dawson proved to be an integral member of Team Hughes. None of us were ready to say goodbye when his internship ended. A huge thanks to “Awesome Dawson” for a job well done!

**Update on Shelley’s Bills (filed with your best interest in mind)**

**Bills are still technically “alive” until session adjourns sine die, but realistically, further action on legislation by the 31st Alaska State Legislature is unlikely.**

**SB60** - Alaska State Defense Force – Ensures consistency as administrations change and bearing of arms for members with constabulary duties.

**SB79** - “Education Transformation Act” – Establishes statewide virtual education platform and a read-by-third-grade policy. Reading policy is now in SB6. See article about virtual education for more info.

**SB81** - Telephone Cooperatives – Allows meetings and voting via electronic means. Allows “telecommunications” in co-op name. Passed senate. Bill language was added in House to another bill which passed both bodies.

**SB109** - Electronic Documents and Notarization – Allows documents to be notarized electronically. HB124 (House companion) passed.

**SB113** - National Board Certification of Teachers – Requires schools to post those certified to honor their hard work and encourage others to join their ranks. Awaits vote on Senate floor.

**SB135** - Health Care Consumers Right to Shop Act – Provides full cost transparency and incentive to shop for below average cost services.

**SB171** – Industrial Hemp - Conforms to federal 2018 Farm Bill to allow interstate commerce. Awaits hearing in Finance.

**SJR13** - Related to Abortion – Proposes amendment to Alaska Constitution to allow questions of abortion to be decided by legislation and voter initiative like in other states, rather than by courts. Excellent hearings but held in Judiciary Committee.

**SB221** - Alaska Sunset Audit Commission – Tasked to conduct financial and performance audits on all state entities and to draft legislation to restructure for efficiencies and improved outcomes. Sunset provision requires legislature to take up audit and recommendations.
Join me Saturday for a virtual coffee chat!

2-way videoconference
~ my home to yours ~

Coffee Chat
with Sen. Shelley Hughes

Saturday
April 25 & May 2
11:00 a.m.

You MUST
Register* in Advance
to receive the link

*To register, email your name and community to Lisa.Hart@akleg.gov

Priority will be given to area residents. Others welcome as space allows. Sign up now!