

Clean Jobs, Clean Energy

By Representative Les Gara D-Anchorage

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Tonight we moved forward with a nice piece of bi-partisan energy work. Today (Friday) Rep. Bill Thomas (R-Haines) and I, with the help of Senators Bill Wielechowski (D-Anch) and Lesil McGuire (R-Anch) sponsored an amendment to move Alaska's energy policy forward. It will require state buildings to be built to comply with national energy efficiency standards (allowing for local exceptions). We also plan to try to add a similar amendment in a few days that will apply to school construction. Why?

Well, for one, energy efficiency, if done smartly, saves money. In many parts of the state electricity is powered by \$8/gallon diesel fuel. In most communities the price of energy is increasing, not decreasing. It makes financial sense to reduce the cost of energy consumption. And, while you might disagree with me, I'm convinced that reducing greenhouse gas emissions is the challenge of this generation. We can't just wait for other states and countries to move ahead on this front. Alaskans should be part of the solution.

Finally, energy upgrades take labor. Labor produces jobs. The amendment we sponsored today will produce some economic benefit, and the comprehensive approach the Legislature is taking this year will produce hundreds, and by some estimates, thousands of Alaska jobs in the next few years. In a state with 8.5% unemployment, that's a good thing.

A few things on credit. I'd like to thank my writer, my mother, my agent, all the little people. . . . Oops. That's the Academy Award speech I hope to deliver someday when I become an actor. Or maybe a key grip. What I meant to say was. . . .

While Rep. Thomas and I sponsored today's amendment, it is on an issue there has been broad support for in the legislature this year. The measure we passed was part of an energy bill Rep. Thomas and I co-sponsored, HB 148. House and Senate Energy Committee Chairs Wielechowski, Lesil McGuire, Charisse Millett and Bryce Edgmon have promoted a similar provision over the past few years and all six of us have worked on this measure.

The bill does lots more. It dedicates \$18 million of President Obama's federal stimulus funding to leverage low interest loans for energy efficiency projects. The federal government will pay 35% of the interest payments on state issued bonds for public building energy efficiency upgrades. State buildings, schools and buildings owned by cities and municipalities would be eligible. And all of this energy efficiency work would create jobs - lots of them. Some state officials estimate this will create 2,500 jobs across Alaska. Good news when we have an 8.5% unemployment rate in the state.

The bill also includes the following provisions:

- An energy efficiency revolving loan fund for public buildings, to help local governments pay for energy upgrades
- Loans to businesses for energy conservation improvements
- An emerging technology fund to jump start new, non-polluting, promising energy projects (tidal energy, for example)
- A study on the feasibility of compressed natural gas for state vehicles

Today's bad news? Well, let me pick just one thing. Alaska has the worst college aid program in the nation for students who cannot afford college. While many of us, with Senator Johnny Ellis taking the lead, were making progress this session on vastly improving Alaska's aid program for Alaskans who need help affording college, vocational education and career training programs, that seems to have stalled. Instead, the Governor has chosen to oppose a needs based aid program in favor of his merit-based one. His bill grants roughly \$2,500 - \$4,500/year to students who earn A's, B's and C's, and take 3-4 years of language, science and math. I pitched an amendment to combine need-based aid with the Governor's merit plan, and our amendment failed in the House Finance Committee. Similar efforts have stalled elsewhere.

The Governor's plan does not provide aid if you are bright, earned a GED, and are ready for college, or want to enter a job training or vocational education program. It doesn't help you if you're bright, loaded with potential, but haven't taken the right courses. It costs a staggering \$20 million, and leaves out help for those who can't afford college or job training, but are qualified to move ahead with college or career training. I like the merit part of the bill, but would shave lots of the high cost, and combine it with a needs-based component.