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Press Availability: Sen. Giessel & Sen. von Imhof

[Link to Audio](#)

Friday morning Senate President Giessel held her weekly informal press availability in her office, with Sen. von Imhof also attending. Below is the education discussion and some of the other discussion.

Sen. Giessel said most of the committees are ramping down. This Sunday is day 90, and some of the committees may have one or two meetings after that. However, they’ve asked the Senate Education Committee to keep meeting. That committee has a number of policy bills that they would like to have developed, and even hold interim meetings on them, so that Sen. Stevens will have solid policy bills to offer next session.

Sen. Giessel said the confirmation joint session on Governor Dunleavy’s appointees will be held on Wednesday, April 17. Some of the appointments have been made very recently, and they won’t have a lot of time to look at those appointees. The Senate State Affairs Committee may hold confirmation hearings for the people who were just appointed to the Human Rights Commission on Monday. When the governor gives them names this late, it’s pretty hard for legislators to talk to those folks and get to know them. They will do their best.

Sen. Giessel said after Easter weekend the key things they will be looking at are the budget and crime legislation.

Sen. von Imhof said the house just finished work on their budget. [*The operating and mental health budgets were just transmitted to the senate on Friday and referred to the Senate Finance Committee.*]

Sen. von Imhof said they will look at the operating budget over the next four days. The Senate Finance subcommittees will all do their closeouts next week. They will have the operating budget in the Senate Finance Committee the Monday after Easter in the afternoon [*April 22*]. Then Div. of Legislative Finance Director David Teal will compare the house version with the senate version. Their budget work in the full committee may take a whole week, and they may go into the last two days of April. They'll then probably have another committee substitute. If she had to guess, the budget will go to the floor about the first weekend of May.

When asked about the house funding 50 percent of school bond debt reimbursement, Sen. von Imhof said there are two issues with school bond debt. There is existing school bond debt, and future school bond debt. They should be cautious about existing school bond debt, because voters had an understanding in the voting booth about what the local responsibility would be and what the state's responsibility would be. She worries that changing that now would open Pandora's box. In regard to future school bond debt, they need to look at the whole picture. What does it mean in terms of retirement? What does it mean in terms of overall debt? What does it mean in terms of funding for all the other agencies? They will be debating that. They are definitely talking about school bond debt. It's high on the priority list of things they want to address.

Regarding Governor Dunleavy's desire to claw back taxes that municipalities have been receiving, such as the Fisheries Business and Landing Taxes and the Oil & Gas Property Tax, Sen. von Imhof said those proposals are dead on arrival.

When asked about the governor's assertion that education funding hasn't actually been appropriated for FY20, Sen. Giessel said they approved education funding for next year. They will stand by that appropriation. The governor can have his own opinion, but the legislature also has their own opinion from Legislative Legal Services that supports the legislature's position.

When asked about broad changes to the foundation formula, Sen. Giessel said there will be many discussions on education policy, which is why the Senate Education Committee will continue to work on legislation that proposes different policy changes. Those policy changes are not to find ways to reduce funding for education, they're ways to improve outcomes. The focus of education is on the student.

Sen. von Imhof said there are many bills that have delayed effective dates in order to implement regulations or an RFP for work to be done. Those delayed effective dates have fiscal notes to them. That may transcend from one legislative session to another. The governor's own bills to pay previous years' dividends make payouts over the next three fiscal years. For the governor to choose one particular line item [*education funding*] in order to have veto power is disingenuous.

House Majority Press Conference

[Audio & Video](#) (Gavel to Gavel)

The House Majority leadership held a press conference Friday morning to discuss passage of [HB 39](#), the FY20 operating budget. Below is some of the discussion.



Reps. Wilson, Kopp, Edgmon, & Foster

Speaker Edgmon said they wanted to give their perspective on HB 39 and to talk about what they will be working on next. They will be working on public safety, the capital budget, and individual legislation. There will be a joint session next Wednesday to vote on governor's appointees. They will continue working with the senate and the governor and all interested stakeholders toward a timely adjournment on May 15th [*the 121st legislative day, and the constitutional deadline for adjournment*].

Rep. Foster said their budget cuts about \$200 million. It's very substantial, while at the same time their goal was to protect core services such as education and public safety. They have a good working relationship with the senate, and he thinks the process will go smoothly once the budget goes to conference committee.

Rep. Wilson said there's been confusion about their process. They started with the FY19 base budget. You always start with the most recent budget. Each subcommittee heard each increase and decrease proposed by Governor Dunleavy. Any member could put forward their amendments in subcommittee, and then in the House Finance Committee.

The process was transparent and open. She took amendments from anyone who wanted to offer one, even people not on the committee. She thought it was a very good process.

Rep. Kopp said he's proud of the House Finance Committee co-chairs. They brought together a very diverse committee. Amendments lasted two-and-a-half to three weeks. When the house organized after 32 days the budget came together in record time. The budget hit the floor only two days later than last year.

Rep. Edgmon said their caucus formed around putting a responsible budget together and emphasizing public safety. The focus in the next week or so will be on public safety, all while getting the capital budget on its way. There are a number of other bills also.

Rep. Kopp said they are going to work on putting together a strong public safety package. The House Judiciary Committee will meet every day next week, perhaps twice a day on some days. He's excited about a number of policy issues they're working on. They are looking at public safety very holistically.

Rep. Wilson said the other thing they are going to work on is the Permanent Fund dividend. They can now focus on public safety and dividends.

Rep. Kopp said part of their public safety legislation will be looking at retirement and defined benefits for public safety professionals. He has a bill [[HB 79](#)] that will be heard in the House Finance Committee next week that is a new way of looking at defined benefits. It's a very conservative approach to getting back to a system they hope can stop the drain of public safety professionals from the state. There is no incentive for younger employees to stay in the state. It's hard to improve public safety when they are not recruiting and retaining the best professionals they can.

When asked if that would be something they might look at for teachers also, Rep. Kopp said the goal is to put a model out there that they can show works. If it doesn't have the results they think it will, then it shouldn't be out there. The Finance Committee chairs in both bodies won't let anything go through unless the data is there to support it. He believes they have arrived at the best possible vehicle that will not only significantly decrease the liability and risk to the state, but will increase the risk to employees while getting them back to a predictable benefit. The states that are doing this have gold-medal plans, because they are 110 percent funded, and they work. But they have to prove it works, and it's hard to go into a new program because TRS and PERS liability is a real issue for the state. If it works, it could be something that future employee groups could come into. His goal is to show that the model works, and to address a real need with

public safety right now. They heard from scores of people explaining what a crisis it is for them in recruitment and retention. He's excited that they think they've found something that can address that in a way that's fiscally responsible and will keep their talent pool in the state during a time they really need it.

Rep. Edgmon said clearly recruitment and retention of teachers in Alaska is a major issue. He and Rep. Foster see, particularly in rural Alaska, how acute the problem is. With the School of Education now apparently going away [UAA], the challenge is still out there: how do they attract and keep good teachers? Because they are not doing a good job of that in Alaska right now, and he thinks it's reflective in a lot of other areas. The approach they are taking [*with public safety officers*] is a first step, but it's something they need to focus on, along with Alaska's Education Challenge and other efforts that are looking at the issue.

When asked about the senior benefits that are going to be cut off on May 1st for the people receiving the lowest tier of benefits, Rep. Foster said they just received notice of that from the administration on Thursday, and a lot of them were surprised. He thinks they will put in a supplemental budget for that, though they haven't talked to the senate yet about that. That would be his hope.

Rep. Edgmon said he's a little miffed. [*He sounded a lot miffed, actually.*] Why did that information come so late to the legislature? The Dept. of Health & Social Services has a pretty healthy contingency fund; why couldn't that \$800,000 have been funded in the interim while working with the legislature to provide a funding source? Why didn't that come to the legislature sooner? There are a lot of seniors out there who are now suffering additional angst, not only with the prospect of losing the Senior Benefits Program all together, but now their monthly payments may or may not be available in April and May, and possibly even later. He thinks they need to improve communications, and if there's an issue that the legislature needs to know about in advance, it should come to them in a timely manner.

Rep. Wilson said the Dept. of Health & Social Services has the authority to move \$20 million. This should have been a priority to the department.

When asked about what appears to be a dispute between the legislature and the governor over forward funding of education for FY20, Rep. Foster said his position on that is two-fold. First, they have the legal opinion from Legislative Legal Services that supports the legislature in taking the action that they did. What they want to do is prevent any possible veto of education funds. If education goes into this budget, then it exposes education to a veto. Last year they forward funded education. The administration attempted to repeal that language in their proposed budget. To him, that's an

acknowledgement that the funds are there and they exist. But that's the governor's contention. He supposes they will have to go down the legal road in terms of having lawyers argue it out.

When asked if they think any of the governor's appointments will have difficulty being confirmed, Rep. Edgmon said that's a good question. Normally, legislators defer to the governor's choice for his cabinet members. The focus in the house has been on the operating budget, and next Wednesday it will be on the confirmation votes. For the next few days a finer point will be put on some appointees. Board of Fish members are always contentious. He thinks there are several commissioners who are still being vetted. At this point, they will know more when the votes are taken. There've been times when he sat on the house floor and you think you know what the vote tally will be, but it doesn't happen that way. They will have to wait and see.

At the end of the press conference, Rep. Wilson spoke about an incident that occurred at North Pole High School, where a girl was in the girl's bathroom and a group of boys came into the bathroom and wouldn't let her leave. According to Rep. Wilson, the girl felt threatened and kned one of the boys and was suspended and not allowed to go to the prom because the school said she used too much force, while the boys were allowed to attend the prom. She said she just got off the phone with her superintendent, and is discouraged because they wanted her to make a decision in the moment about how much force to use. She doesn't care why the boys were in the bathroom. She wants to tell young women at North Pole High School that they don't have to make that choice: if they ever feel threatened for their safety, they should use whatever force they feel they need to, and she and the community will stand behind them. Everything went backwards the way it was handled.