

Our Path Forward: Determined Optimism

By Curtis W. Thayer

Having spent time in Juneau at the beginning of the legislative session for the Alaska Chamber's annual Legislative Fly-In, I'm pleased to see that my enthusiasm for 2017 is reflected in the halls of the State Capitol. There are some optimistic new faces in Juneau this year. And I saw confident, determined looks on the faces of veteran legislators.

Over the past several years, Alaskans have watched as state government argued over the size of our public spending problem. In rare cases, some questioned if the State truly faced fiscal challenges at all. But the paralysis of indecision that plagued the Capitol appears to be behind us.

As Alaskans, we are blessed in so many ways, including the resources needed to fix our fiscal problems. Our financial reserves are most certainly under strain and we can't live off savings forever. But our resources are considerable and by working swiftly, collaboratively and wisely, we can close our fiscal gap while encouraging future investment.

Alaska needs a fair and balanced approach to solve our fiscal crisis. The options for balancing the budget remain viable.

1. Cut the cost of government. We must live within our means.
2. Restructure the Permanent Fund to protect the dividend and include controlled use of the earnings reserve account to pay for government services.

Alaskans have made it abundantly clear that new and increased taxes are an option *only* after steps one and two are complete. While the state has made some cuts, we have yet to tackle the large-dollar, formula-based spending items. Similarly, recent budget reductions are the result of pushing obligations off into the future. When the bill eventually comes due, we must have a fiscal plan that accommodates those obligations.

Restructuring the Permanent Fund can help us close the gap. Moving to a percent of market value plan – as proposed in the Senate – or similar structure is a part of Alaska's blueprint for economic stability. When paired with spending limits like those proposed by both the House and Senate, Alaska can again be a stable and predictable partner for investment.

Sustainable state spending isn't the only issue for Chamber members and Alaska's economic future, and it's not the only issue moving in the Capitol this year.



Workers' Compensation reform is a perennial top priority for both employers and workers. Workers' compensation is a complicated system and one with universal impact on Alaska's workforce. It's taken years to bring the stakeholders to the table and to lay a foundation for systemic, comprehensive reform. Expect more from the Chamber on this topic over the coming months. And look forward to a workers' compensation system that better protects employees and employers while getting Alaskans back on the job.

Seeking to grow our economy we are working with our federal delegation on access to lands and resource development for the benefit of all Alaskans. We're working with within our fisheries and with our maritime, tourism, mining, and timber industries to ensure Alaska's economy is diverse, robust and marketed successfully to the world. But stability for the future starts with a predictable and sustainable state government.

With stability comes investment and economic health for Alaska. That's a goal that crosses party lines. It's important for employers and workers – public and private. It's something that Alaskans are demanding more and more vocally. And I'm optimistic that we'll get there this year.

Curtis W. Thayer is lifelong Alaskan and serves as president and CEO of the Alaska Chamber.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Curtis W. Thayer' with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.