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## Politics

# Compromise in works for management of coastal development

Patti Epler | Apr 05, 2011



JUNEAU -- Coastal lawmakers and state officials appear to have reached a compromise on an issue that threatened to zap the state's power to sway federal development decisions.

The House Resources Committee this week passed a coastal zone management bill that gives local communities more input into development proposals in their areas without giving them the authority to veto projects of statewide interest.

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"This recognizes the desire of coastal communities to have more input while respecting the state's position on consistency reviews," House Resources co-chair Eric Feige told committee members before they passed the bill. It now goes to the House Finance Committee for review.

The Alaska Coastal Management Program is part of a federal program that has been overseen by the state since the 1970s. It created coastal resource districts that had substantial ability to oversee development projects and other issues in their areas through the state's consistency review process. Communities were allowed to have "local enforceable policies" that generally were accepted as the final word on development issues.

The program was significantly revamped in 2003 and local enforceable policies became much more difficult to put in place, let alone carry out. Communities lost the ability to have any say over air and water quality issues, which were taken over by the state Department of Environmental Conservation. They were not allowed to use coastal program money to hire consultants to help them with their plans.

The program was set to expire in July and Gov. Sean Parnell introduced legislation that would have extended it another six years as is. But rural lawmakers through the Bush Caucus protested and pushed for changes that would strengthen local communities' ability to oversee their own backyards.

The governor resisted and a political standoff began. Parnell said he didn't want local governments to have veto power over big development projects, including major oil and gas projects, that could affect jobs and the state's economy. Rural lawmakers pointed out they just wanted the same consideration from the state -- local control of sorts -- that Parnell has said Alaska wants from the federal government.

In recent weeks, Bush lawmakers have complained that the governor refused to listen to their proposals. At least two things happened that appear to have gotten the administration's attention. First, Sens. Donny Olson and Lyman Hoffman made it clear that they would hold up the bill in the Senate and if the program lapsed, then so be it. Letting the federal government take it back, as it did with subsistence oversight in some areas 10 years ago, would be better, they said.

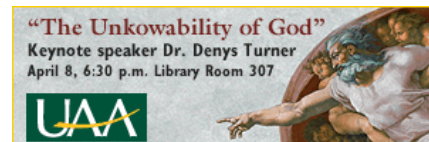
To back that up, Hoffman, who co-chairs the Senate Finance Committee, stripped funding for the program from the governor's proposed operating budget, eliminating 33 jobs and cutting \$4.6 million.

Homer Rep. Paul Seaton crafted a substitute bill that, among other things, established an oversight board that included local residents. DNR deputy commissioner Joe Balash said at that point that the administration had been waiting for a response from the Bush Caucus, and that the agency would be meeting with lawmakers.

The bill that passed the House Resources Committee is the result of what Rep. Berta Gardner, a member of the committee, called a "negotiated settlement" between the governor and the coastal communities.

It establishes a five-member Alaska Coastal Policy Board whose members are appointed by the governor from names put forward by the local coastal districts. The board would make recommendations on coastal management plans and provide a way for local districts to participate more effectively in consistency reviews.

The issue of taking back some of DEC's authority over air and water quality issues hasn't been resolved,



Gardner said, but likely will be smoothed out in House Finance or when the bill gets to the Senate.

The bill "absolutely" gives the coastal communities more input, Gardner said Tuesday.

"It doesn't give them veto power but it does give them a seat at the table," she said, "and the right to bring issues on to that table that aren't there."

Rep. Beth Kerttula spent five years as the assistant attorney general representing the coastal management program. "It's one of the biggest issues that affects the state," she said. "It's the only way we get a hook into federal projects" such as offshore oil development.

Without the mechanism of the coastal management program, the state would not have a formal position with the federal government on projects that might occur in the state's coastal areas. It would be just another public commenter, officials have said.

With oil companies pushing to work in the Arctic and staging their operations in coastal communities, the state had a real interest in not allowing the program to sunset.

Kerttula credited the veteran senator Hoffman's legislative maneuver to strip the program's funding as the key to getting the issue resolved -- at least enough to move it along in the process.

"That was a really important thing for him to do," she said. "He was strong enough and knowledgeable enough and well-regarded enough to be able to do that."

What will finally happen with the coastal management bill remains to be seen. At a press conference Tuesday, Hoffman suggested things were moving ahead but was noncommittal about whether the House bill would satisfy his concerns.

Olson couldn't be reached for comment, but a hearing in his Community and Rural Affairs Committee on bills that would have extended the program as is was cancelled late Tuesday.

David Harding, a spokesman for the North Slope Borough, which has been closely following the debate, said borough officials are glad the administration seems to be much more engaged this year than it has in the past.

As for the changes in the House bill, "frankly, we're still picking our through them, what the implications are and how they'll play in the real world. So no conclusions yet."

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