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Wendy Redman

Public access to the legislature and how citizens can affect the legislative process

Scott Sterling, interviewer

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Sterling said the issue of access the legislature and how citizens can affect the legislative process is one of concern to many Alaskans. He asked Wendy Redman what access to the legislature means. Redman talked about being able to have input into the legislature, being able to contact them as individual citizens and the ability to have impact on the process. She said in Alaska we have a unique system. Through the Legislative Affairs Office located around the state you can have direct access to Juneau and your legislator. It is a tremendous access for the public and the communities. It is becoming more and more well used. She said the Fairbanks office has a tremendous load of people coming in every day. Teleconferencing is used primarily for bill hearings although the Fairbanks delegation also use it once or twice a week to deal with constituents' problems.

Sterling asked about letter writing and making phone calls. Redman said they have a system in Alaska of public opinion messages similar to those used at the national level. Citizens can send free messages and as many as they want to any individual legislator up to fifty words. She discussed the pros and cons of the different methods of contact. Legislators rely on the input about issues.

Sterling asked why lobbying was necessary. Redman said the legislature deals with a tremendous number of issues. It is important for citizens to communicate with their delegation. There is a real art to knowing how to lobby successfully. She is referring to public interest lobbying. There is a tremendous amount of interaction between the public and members of the legislature. Many of the legislators do maintain office in their home communities and many legislators return back to their community as often as possible.

Sterling asked about guidelines for citizens to follow for lobbying. Redman said it is important to understand the issue and to understand the legislative process. Targeting your work is important. You need to identify the individuals who are key votes. You also need to be prepared with some options. If you go in with a single unbendable idea of what you want out of the legislature then you may be disappointed. It is important to be fairly narrow in what you are trying to do. She said one of the key things on any kind of lobbying effort it is the role of the lobbying group to show the legislature group why it should be of interest to them. The legislators must see it as the best interest of the community.

Sterling asked where legislators get their information and are lobbying groups a significant amount of information. Redman said she often wonders about that herself. She said most of the legislators are bright and competent people as well as their staff. Each legislator will come to discussions prepared with a list of priorities based on what they have heard and what they know about their own communities. Staff of the legislators seek out input from people in agencies that will be responsible for

implementation of certain kinds of statutory changes. They seek out information from experts in the natural resources, health, and education. Often they rely on people from the public coming to them with draft pieces of legislation or issues they want converted to legislation.

Sterling asked how public interest groups can be effective in the legislative process. Redman said you have to accept the notion that they are part of the legislative process. Very often people in this country feel so far removed from the process that they don't even try. People have to understand that they do count and they do have an impact. Legislators are elected by the public and if we don't like what they are doing they can be unelected. The interest groups have to have a clear agenda. They have to define what it is they want and why existing statutes are inappropriate to accomplish their agenda. Sterling asked if legislators are aware of what is wanted such as a limited session. Redman said she thought so. She thought it was an artificial limit.

Sterling asked if public interest groups in Alaska are closer to their legislators. Redman said that is generally accepted as being true. He asked if an individual can keep track of a bill they are interested in through the process. The majority of the process can be tracked. The state has Basis which everyone can access. It is a bill tracking system. It is updated every day after the daily session. She said you need to look at who the sponsors of the bill are. If the sponsors are from the house minority then it is unlikely the bill will go anywhere quickly.

Sterling asked if it is worthwhile to educate the public on the legislative process on a systematic basis. Redman said absolutely. She said there are groups that do that. They have special legislative work sessions so they can begin to understand the process. Sterling asked about enhancing access. Redman talked about enhanced accessibility and introduced legislation this year. She said the vast majority of legislation goes nowhere.