

August 29, 2023

Municipality of Anchorage
Salaries and Emoluments Commission

Dear Salaries and Emoluments Commissioners:

We are writing to request that you take action to make the employer health care benefits contribution for Anchorage Assembly Members consistent with the compensation package of other municipal employees. Assembly Members currently receive a \$250 bi-weekly municipal benefit stipend, while other municipal staff working twenty hours or more a week receive a much larger monthly employer contribution to their health care plans – \$2,195 a month for executive and non-represented staff. As former Assembly Members who no longer have a financial interest in the matter, we feel strongly that financially attainable health care coverage for Members is a matter of fairness and equity, and will help ensure an economically diverse composition of the Assembly.

The recent debate over salaries for Alaska legislators demonstrates that fair pay and benefits for elected officials is a growing concern. When the pay and benefits for elected officials are so low that only wealthier residents can participate, it harms the democratic process and leads to elected officials who have less in common with the people they represent. The Anchorage Assembly functions best when it is a true reflection of our community, and the addition of health care benefits will make the job more accessible to a wider range of people.

The issue is also a matter of fairness. The work of an Assembly Member frequently exceeds 40 hours of work a week. If any other municipal worker put in this many hours and did not receive the full health care benefits package, it would be a violation of municipal policy. In fact, even part-time municipal employees are eligible for the full monthly health care benefits contribution. To get an idea of an Assembly Member's schedule, in a recent two-week pay period in June, a time when the Assembly tends to have a lighter schedule, the Assembly had 28 hours of meetings in which members were expected to participate. They also spend about 4 hours a week in committee meetings, 10 hours a week responding to constituents, 10 hours a week working on legislation and research or related communication with municipal employees and partners, and 6 hours a week at community council meetings and community events, which yields well over 80 hours of work per two-week pay period.

The work of an Assembly Member is full-time work that requires a high level of communication and organizational skills, a strong understanding of municipal and state law, and knowledge of a wide range of local issues, from Port infrastructure and building codes to homelessness and public health. Yet the salary is commensurate with a mid-level Municipality of Anchorage professional and the members receive a health care stipend so low, it is unaffordable for most

people. As a result, most Assembly Members must depend on the income and health insurance of a spouse, a second job, or an existing retirement package. These are factors that favor higher-income people and are likely to dissuade lower-income and single-income community members from seeking this office. This is not merely theoretical; many of us have talked with potential candidates who cite the low pay and lack of health care as reasons they were not able to seek this office. Assembly Member Pete Petersen heard from a potential candidate just this past election who reported that she didn't run because she has young children and was worried that she would not have health coverage for them if she won the Assembly seat.

As a direct example of this financial disparity, one of us, Pete Petersen has the following to share, "I recall being surprised when I was first elected to the Assembly and went to HR to inquire about signing up for health insurance coverage. I found out the cost would use up all of my take home pay from the Assembly, plus a couple hundred dollars a month to be covered. When I was in the legislature, we had full coverage. Since I was under 65 years at the time, I was forced to sign up for health insurance through the Federal plan (Obama Care). The municipal salary was so low that I was required to get a subsidy for my coverage, which was embarrassing as someone who has worked hard and covered my own bills my entire adult life."

The Anchorage Assembly benefits are also out of alignment with peers within the municipality and state. The Anchorage Mayor is treated as a full-time regular employee, with health care benefits included, and makes more than twice the annual salary of an Assembly Member. In another comparable jurisdiction, the Mayor and Assembly Members of the City & Borough of Juneau are offered the same standard health plan and employer contributions as employees.

On the state level, even before the recent salary adjustment¹, Alaska State legislators made more money than Assembly Members, while representing fewer constituents (a house district is about 18,000 people and an Assembly district is about 48,000 people). Legislators also have more staff to assist (usually at least 2 full-time, year-round staff, compared to the Assembly budget for one aide at about 10 hours a week), and they work less (a session runs from January through May and in the interim, legislators have a considerably smaller workload). Yet, Alaska legislators receive full health benefits on top of enrollment in the PERS retirement system and their salary and per diem (\$87,554 salary and per diem in 2022 and \$121,000 in 2024).

As former Assembly Members who care deeply about the Assembly as a community institution and are invested in its future success, we feel strongly that the addition of health care benefits is both warranted and necessary to the health of the institution. We urge you to work to implement this change immediately to make health care equal and fair across the Municipality of Anchorage workforce.

¹ <https://www.adn.com/politics/alaska-legislature/2023/05/16/alaska-legislature-fails-to-block-pay-raises-for-lawmakers-governor-and-cabinet/>

Thank you for your service to our city. We are so grateful.

Sincerely,

Austin Quinn Davidson, Anchorage Assembly, District 3, 2018-2023, Assembly Chair, 2020;
Acting Mayor, 2020-2021

Pete Petersen, Anchorage Assembly, District 5, 2014-2023

Suzanne LaFrance, Anchorage Assembly, District 6 2017-2023, Assembly Chair, 2021-2023

Forrest Dunbar, Anchorage Assembly, District 5, 2016-2023, Assembly Chair 2018 and 2020

Eric Croft, Anchorage Assembly, District 3, 2016-2019, Assembly Chair, 2018-2019

Elvi Gray-Jackson, Anchorage Assembly, District 4, 2008-2017, Assembly Chair, 2016-2017

Patrick Flynn, Anchorage Assembly, District 1, 2008-2017, 2009-2010, 2014

Melinda Taylor, Anchorage Assembly, District 5, 1998-2004

Joey Sweet, Anchorage Assembly, District 5, 2023

Barbara Jones, Retired Municipal Clerk, 2012-2023