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Alaska lawmakers debate override of Palin's stimulus money veto

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FAIRBANKS — Legislative leaders are asking the federal government how long they have to decide whether to override Gov. Sarah Palin's veto of \$28.56 million in energy aid — and whether an override is worth the trouble if they have to rely on the governor to accept the funds.

An override would require a three-fourths majority of the Legislature, or 45 votes. House Democrats announced they would vote to overturn the governor's action. Sen. President Gary Stevens, R-Kodiak, said his bipartisan majority caucus is disappointed in the veto, but he can't rationalize calling a special session without a guarantee that the Legislature can accept the money without Palin's OK. Sen. Gene Therriault, R-North Pole, said some within his four-person minority are dismayed Palin rejected the funds.

House Speaker Mike Chenault,

R-Nikiski, said many in his caucus are waiting to see what the federal government's response is before making up their minds on an override for the federal stimulus package energy dollars.

"She can veto anything she wants," Chenault said. "But, is it the right thing to do? That money is going to be spent whether we accept it or not. If my grandkids are going to be paying for it, the people of Alaska should see some sort of benefit."

When asked whether Palin would accept the money following a legislative override, spokeswoman Sharon Leighow said in an e-mail "We will cross that bridge when we get there."

She pointed to Palin's comments in a press release issued several weeks ago noting a veto override is an option for the Legislature.

"At this point, we won't speculate on where the votes would fall," Leighow said.

Therriault said he would need more information before casting his vote.

"This could very well be an area the governor and I differ in opinion on," he said.

Lawmakers want to know if they can wait until the session convenes in January to put an override on the table, or whether they would have to call a special session to meet a Department of Energy deadline. They also are asking whether a legislative resolution would be enough to accept the funds, if Palin refuses to do so.

That will be an important distinction for lawmakers, Stevens said. Unless Palin has "a change of heart," he can't justify a special session to flip her decision.

"It's sort of a Mexican stand-off right now," he said. "There's not much we can do — the governor has a lot more power in this."

Lawmakers noted in the letter to Energy Secretary Steven Chou that officials indicated a willingness to work with Alaska on a late application, but didn't specify how long they would extend deadlines. The official cut-off was May 12.

Many legislators and others involved in energy projects around the state criticized Palin for rejecting the funds, saying the money would have accomplished a lot in the state with the highest energy costs in the nation.

"I think she made a mistake," said Fairbanks North Star Borough Mayor Jim Whitaker. "I think it's perfectly reasonable that the governor would advocate for efficiency, and I think she does. But, she's been trapped in political rhetoric, and that is most unfortunate."

Palin originally said she would not accept about a third of the \$930 million Alaska was eligible for under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, citing "strings" that could bind the state to federal mandates and increase the size of government.

As legislators delved into the stimulus plan and found few strings, they passed a bill accepting all federal money. Palin vetoed the \$28.56 million in energy money on the grounds that doing so would commit her to advocating energy efficiency and adoption of building codes in Alaska

communities.

She said communities should be able to decide for themselves whether to have energy-efficient building codes.

“Most reasonable people understand that being energy-efficient is a really good thing,” said Chris Rose, executive director of Renewable Energy Alaska Project. “The lowest cost energy you’ll ever get is the energy you don’t have to use. To say that energy efficiency is good for some, and not for others, makes no sense to me.”

The \$28.56 million could have helped the Alaska Energy Authority cover priority projects not funded this year, or furthered the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation’s efficiency programs.

“The Alaska Legislature has put \$125 million into the renewable energy grant fund over the last 15 months,” Rose said. “This certainly seems like another place where money like that could have been used.”

Also in need of funding are research and development projects, such as those underway at the Alaska Center for Energy and Power at University of Alaska Fairbanks.

“Alaska has an incredible opportunity to be a leader in the world in certain technologies,” Rose said. “When we’re relying on oil revenues for 85 or 90 percent of the state’s income, we really ought to be thinking about diversifying a lot more than we are. There’s no reason we should reject money that would help us be competitive in that field.”

Janie Leask is president and CEO of First Alaskans Institute, a Native nonprofit dedicated to policy, research and education on issues impacting Alaska Natives.

She is hopeful the Legislature has time to accept the money before another state benefits from Alaska’s share.

“We have seen already this spring the villages crying out for help and assistance, and the cost of fuel is going back up again,” she said. “I would hope that the Legislature sees this, and would do the right thing.”