Summary of Sitka School District State Legislative Capital and Operational Priorities

Operational Requests:

1) Restore the $50 cut to the Base Student Allocation (BSA) which was in the omnibus funding bill HB 278 passed at the end of the 28th Legislature. Restoring this $50 would by no stretch get us to full funding needed to provide for adequate K-12 education but will help district’s not start our budget cycle in a deficit.
2) Fund the Alaska Marine Highway System to better serve southeast communities. This service helps southeast districts save money on travel for activities.
3) Adequately fund optional preschool programs in districts throughout the State of Alaska. These programs would increase academic achievement in students in all communities.

Capital Requests:

1) Keet Gooshi Heen Elementary School Covered Area Roofing and Siding - $384,000 Estimate
   a. New roof and siding for the covered area on the Keet Gooshi Heen which is the main elementary school in the district.
2) Keet Gooshi Heen Elementary School Playground Equipment - $225,000 Estimate
   a. Improvements in the safety, quality and age appropriateness of the current equipment for our 2nd-5th graders.

Timeliness:

The Sitka School Board is requesting that the second session of the 29th Legislature be finished in fewer than 90 days, and would greatly appreciate settling on the education budget and finances by March 15, 2016.
FY 2017 Sitka School District State Legislative Capital and Operational Priorities

The Sitka School Board, acutely aware of the State of Alaska’s precarious fiscal situation, and in a spirit of fiscal restraint, has trimmed back its requests for funding substantially compared to FY 2016. The request for funding for instructional and professional development materials to meet new state standards for alignment of curriculum in math and language arts, expected to cost $1,648,800, has been put in abeyance. Like wise the $250,000 request for teacher and principal evaluation development and implementation has been shelved. To an extent these decisions cause us both philosophical and legal anxiety as the captioned programs are mandated by statute and regulation. We have also deferred, for the fourth time, a request for $1,500,000 for improvements to drainage, repair of track and base path surfaces and repair of pitcher’s mounds for Sitka’s seven ball fields.

Operational Requests

1) The Sitka School District and its School Board most urgently entreats the legislature to restore the $50 cut to the Base Student Allocation (BSA) which was in the omnibus funding bill HB278 passed at the end of the 28th Legislature (AS14.17.470 Sections 23, 27, 28, 29, and 59 are the relevant sections). It was scuttled during the “end game” negotiations of the 28th Legislature as a price the majority extracted for getting the minority vote for opening the Constitutional Budget Reserve (CBR). [Sections 23, 27, 28, and 29 gradually raised the BSA to $5930 while Section 59 placed an effective date on the final $50 jump to $5930 as July 1, 2016] This by no stretch of the imagination gets us to the full funding needed to provide for an adequate K-12 education, but we will not be starting our budget cycle in deficit. The FY2015 funding for the Sitka School District required us to eliminate three teaching positions. This may not seem like a large number but we have been hemorrhaging staff for years and asking remaining staff to take on additional classes, classes for which they are often not certified. It has significantly reduced our ability to offer electives. Any further erosion of the BSA will have results. Every day we have students idling around campus, especially in the day’s final period, who would be happy to take an elective if one was on offer. Just as sports, especially football, keeps some teenagers in school through graduation, electives, especially music, keeps others.

2) Another urgent matter is ferry service. Sitka is experiencing the worst ferry service since statehood this year. We get one ferry northbound and one southbound weekly and the fast ferries to the villages are out of service until next July. To save money we have traditionally had sports teams and bands travel at least one way by ferry and if necessary one way by air. We would request increased ferry service be provided to coincide with significant athletic, academic and music activities. It may also be wise to make Prince Rupert the southern terminus of the Alaska Marine Highway System, especially in the summer. This would free up some of the smaller ships to provide feeder runs to the village communities. Prince Rupert has reliable road connections to Bellingham in the summer and British Columbia Ferries connect Prince Rupert to Vancouver.

3) Studies have shown that Early Childhood Education, specifically Preschool programs, greatly increase the social and academic success of students. Adequately funded optional preschool programs in districts throughout the State of Alaska would increase the academic achievement of all communities. There have been a few very small pilot studies funded by the state over the last decade but measurable results would take a considerably greater enrollment. Perhaps given our straitened resources we could see if a philanthropy organization would like to take on such a project. Doing it in Alaska might have a romantic cachet to it. It might also be possible to expand the number of Alaska Public Health Nurses in state employment and expand their role to include provision of early childhood especially in their peregrinations in Bush Alaska.
Capital Requests

1) Keet Gooshi Heen Elementary School Covered Area Roofing and Siding - $384,000 Estimate

Sitka School District is seeking funding for a new roof and siding for the covered play area on the Keet Gooshi Heen playground. Over the years of extensive use in Sitka’s damp climate the covered area is in need of repair. The covered area is important during recess and after school, due to the inclement weather that we have here in Sitka. The Keet Gooshi Heen playground and covered area is also an important community asset for families and students on the weekends and non-school days. As examples of the importance of this resource to the community as a whole, the covered area is routinely used for birthday parties and United States Coast Guard picnics.

2) Keet Gooshi Heen Elementary School Playground Equipment = $225,000 Estimate

Sitka School District seeks funding to replace and upgrade the playground equipment at Keet Gooshi Heen Elementary School. Improvements in the safety, quality and age appropriateness of the current equipment are important to meet the needs of the students in second through fifth grade. Current standards for playground equipment have changed significantly since the facility was built. Trends in child obesity and our community focus on wellness require robust facilities for students to increase their physical activity during recess and after school. It is in the elementary years that this is most important for it is in early childhood that the engrain of valuing and seeking vigorous exercise is normally formed.

Timeliness

Your children will tell you it would be AWESOME if you finished the second session of the 29th Legislature in fewer than 90 days. Alaska’s school boards would unanimously sponsor all 60 of you for canonization if you settle on the education budget and finances by March 15, 2016. As you are all aware local school boards, cities and boroughs have deadlines for submitting budgets that typically fall in late April or early May while the Alaska Legislature, if it is to be in session for the statutory 90 days, adjourns no earlier than April 19th. Local tax rates, hiring decisions and local operating and capital expenditures are closely tied in with the state’s bottom line. For school boards decisions on whether or not to extend employment of non-tenured teachers depend on yearly revenues of which 75% are provided by the state. Thus, if expected revenue and expenditures look problematic, we issue “pink slips” sometime in April. To do otherwise would be unjust for the prize positions in other districts in Alaska or down south may well be already awarded if the state education budget and/or adjournment of the Legislature are delayed. Additionally union rules are such that we cannot extend the employment of a non-tenured teacher if it will displace the employment of a tenured teacher except under very unusual circumstances. All of us on local school boards, borough assemblies and city councils act more rationally and make better decisions when state educational revenues and expenditures are decided.