

OPINION

COMPASS: *Points of view from the community*

New voice for Alaska utility consumers

By GREGG D. RENKES

With little fanfare, Gov. Frank Murkowski gave Alaskans' interest in just and reasonable utility rates new representation during the last legislative session. By executive order, the governor charged the attorney general with responsibility for determining the public interest in utility matters and advocating that interest before the state utility regulator, the Regulatory Commission of Alaska.

The RCA regulates public utilities and pipelines in Alaska to ensure they provide safe, reliable services for consumers at just and reasonable rates. The Legislature created the RCA in 1999 as the successor to the Alaska Public Utilities Commission. At the same time, it established a Public Advocacy Section within the RCA to express the public's interest in various matters coming before the commission. Under that arrangement, the RCA chairperson directed the PAS to participate as a party in RCA proceedings at the commission's determination.

The new law removes the dual and potentially conflicted responsibility from the commission while recognizing the importance of the public interest by transferring that role from the RCA chairman to the attorney general.

In all other matters, the attorney general has a broad grant of authority to participate in any legal action or proceeding necessary to protect the public interest. For example, I frequently take actions to pro-



Just as my office works to protect consumers, I am committed to seeing that ratepayers get the attention and aggressive representation before the RCA that they deserve.

tect consumers from unfair trade practices, such as the recent consumer fraud action affecting tourists in Alaska.

It is appropriate that the responsibility of representing Alaska's citizens in utility matters now specifically rests with the people's lawyer — the attorney general. Just as my office works every day to protect consumers across the state, I am committed to seeing that ratepayers get the attention and aggressive representation before the RCA that they deserve.

The Department of Law has a sharp new focus on public advocacy for utility ratepayers. To facilitate this attention, I appointed attorney Daniel Patrick O'Tierney, a former Alaska Public Utilities Commissioner, to lead the way. Our team consists of experienced utility lawyers and RCA staff experts who will support my responsibility as advocate for Alaska consumers in RCA proceedings.

As telephone, electric and other utilities grow in size and complexity to become more competitive in Alaska, it is important to pay close attention to the rights of

each consumer. This requires carefully balancing the consumers' interest in affordable services with the need of maintaining healthy utility service providers that can make the necessary investments. We join numerous other states in making public advocacy before the utility commission an essential and exclusive responsibility of the attorney general's office.

I am also working with organizations like the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates and other state attorneys general to bring the best ideas here to improve the way I serve Alaskans affected by RCA decisions. For example, I am considering a citizen's advisory panel similar to the one in Washington state that advises the attorney general on utility matters.

There is a new voice for Alaska's utility consumers. I will assure that it is a strong voice that demands just and reasonable rates for the utility services upon which we all depend.

Gregg D. Renkes is Alaska's attorney general.