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Industry silenced locals on coastal planning

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COMPASS: *Other points of view*

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This is the story of coastal management and Alaska politics.

The story begins in 1975 when Alaska first faced oil drilling off our coast. Gov. Jay Hammond recognized the state needed a way to deal with the "onslaught of massive, unplanned development from federal Outer Continental Shelf oil leasing" that would inundate coastal communities "with onshore impacts demanding great public services expenditures, and threatening the very lifestyle of our coastal communities."

These were Gov. Hammond's words when introducing the first coastal management program to Alaska. The program was part of the federal Coastal Zone Management Act that gave states the option to figure out how best to balance competing development pressures on their coastlines. The act requires federal agencies to conduct activities consistently with a state's federally approved coastal program.

In developing Alaska's coastal management program, it soon became clear that coastal communities wanted an effective voice in decisions that could affect their livelihood and quality of life. They wanted a program that would accommodate the great variation in Alaska's coastal resources and uses. They wanted local control.

In 1977, in response to the people's desires, the Legislature enacted a coastal management program that gave local governments a major role in planning for development in their regions. With a few changes, this was Alaska's coastal management program for 26 years.

The coastal program worked by balancing competing coastal uses and resolving conflicts. With coastal management, an oil and gas facility might be located away from an important habitat area, or transportation routes might be consolidated to minimize their impact on coastal resources. Most importantly, the program got federal and state government agencies to work with local communities on solutions and avoiding conflicts. Under coastal management, thousands of projects, large and small, were successfully developed.

Over the years, the coastal program evolved with changing circumstances. But the core of the program, a strong role for local governments, remained. That changed in 2003 with the election of Gov. Frank Murkowski.

Gov. Murkowski and his chief of staff had no love for the coastal management program, particularly for the role of local governments. Soon after taking office, Murkowski succeeded in changing the law to significantly reduce local governments' role in coastal management. But he didn't stop there.

Murkowski's administration passed regulations that closed off almost every door for local governments to meaningfully participate in coastal planning and development decisions. With almost 100 pages of regulations, the new coastal program was bureaucratic, complex and offered little value for coastal communities.

When a 2011 sunset date for the coastal program came due, concerned legislators attempted to crack open a few doors for local involvement. These attempts met resistance from Gov. Parnell and influential Republican

legislators. Politics ensued, and when the dust settled, Alaska's coastal management program was no more.

In the fall of 2011, community leaders from across Alaska put forward a coastal program ballot initiative. Using provisions from both the original and recent coastal program, the initiative set up a structure to build a new program that would restore local governments' role in coastal management.

Support for the initiative came from Alaska's communities and hundreds of individual Alaskans. The opposition was backed by large resource producing corporations and trade associations representing industry interests. Clearing away the campaign rhetoric, at the heart of the opposition was antagonism toward the role of local communities in coastal development decisions. With a \$1.5 million war chest, the opposition succeeded and the initiative failed by a wide margin.

As in 1975, Alaska is facing an onslaught of coastal development, as well as the prospect of a melting Arctic. But our politics have changed. Rather than supporting Alaska's communities, our governor and many Republican legislators are more aligned with corporate interests that support centralized state and federal control over coastal development. The wealthy corporations doing business in Alaska can overwhelm our election system with advertising dollars.

But we still have the vote. This election season, please consider carefully who you vote for and whose interests they represent.

Lisa Weissler is a former assistant attorney general specializing in oil, gas and mining law and coastal management. She has also served as staff counsel to numerous Alaska legislators and as a project analyst for the former coastal management program, special assistant for the Department of Natural Resources, superior court law clerk, and as a forester for the U.S. Forest Service. She is currently retired and recently volunteered as policy director for the Alaska Sea Party initiative to restore coastal management. The views expressed here are her own.

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