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October 8, 2008

The Honorable Mark Begich
Mayor of the Municipality of Anchorage
P.O. Box 196650
Anchorage, AK 99519

Ms. Carol Comeau
Superintendent
Anchorage School District
5530 East Northern Lights Boulevard
Anchorage, AK 99504

Re: Rural migration

Dear Mayor Begich and Superintendent Comeau:

Thank you both for your recent letter expressing concern over the challenging conditions in many of our rural communities resulting in migration to urban cities.

There is currently a rural sub-cabinet in place focusing on issues such as migration from rural Alaska to urban cities. The Attorney General chairs the sub-cabinet, and we would appreciate any information you can submit to him on this issue as soon as possible.

As we all realize, collecting and analyzing information will be critical to forming effective responses. An initial and preliminary review of information shows some rural school districts had increased enrollment in fiscal year 2008 compared to roughly a decade ago, fiscal year 1999 (Chugach, Craig, Delta Greely, Denali, Galena, Kashunamiut, Lower Yukon, Nenana, Saint Mary's, Unalaska, Yukon-Koyukuk, and Yupiit). Some rural areas and school districts are also providing initial communications of steady or nearly steady student enrollment figures compared to last year (Alaska Gateway, Bering Strait, Lake and Peninsula, and Lower Kuskokwim districts, for example).

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I have asked Commissioner LeDoux of the Department of Education and Early Development; Commissioner Notti of the Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development; and Commissioner Bishop of the Department of Labor and Workforce Development to gather relevant data and forward it on to the rural sub-cabinet. The rural sub-cabinet will also review "safety net" provisions in the law (such as those contained in HB 273) that mitigate the financial impact of school districts experiencing a drop in enrollment.

You also mentioned high fuel prices as a migration driver. While the recent ISER study, "Fuel Costs, Migration, and Community Viability," found a lack of evidence that fuel prices were a definite cause of migration, they could be a significant factor. Steve Haagenson, energy coordinator and executive director of the Alaska Energy Authority, is preparing a plan to help Alaskans from all areas of the state, both rural and urban, cope with high energy costs. He will consider the impact of high fuel costs on rural Alaska and include a review of issues such as the power-cost equalization program as part of his planning effort.

Thank you again for bringing your concerns to my attention. We look forward to receiving any information you can provide and working with you and the Alaska Congressional Delegation on the important issues discussed in your letter.

Sincerely,

Sarah Palin
Governor

cc: Alaska Congressional Delegation
Click Bishop, Commissioner, Department of Labor and Workforce Development
Larry LeDoux, Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development
Emil Notti, Commissioner, Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic
Development
Steven Haagenson, Executive Director, Alaska Energy Authority

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Mayor Begich & Comeau - 10.08.08