

Alaska Common Ground – Our First 30 years

Peg Tileston – Founding Board Member

Comments at ACG's 30th Anniversary Celebration – June 1, 2022



Peg Tileston at 30th Anniversary Celebration
In the beginning...

Like many things, Alaska Common Ground was conceived from a combination of a muddled political and economic situation and a person determined to do something about it.

That person was our founder, Esther Wunnicke. Esther understood the importance of the role of public participation in forming good public policy. She had been on the Federal Field Commission that helped put Alaska back together after the 1964 earthquake and the Federal-State Land Use Commission that held hundreds of hearings all over the state that led to the formation of the Alaska National Interest Lands Act. She finished her career as the Alaska Commissioner of Natural Resources.

When Esther retired from public service, Alaska was just emerging from economic turmoil caused by a significant drop in oil prices and a banking collapsed that devastated the housing market. On the political side Wally Hickel had just won the governor's race against Arliss Sturgulewski and Tony Knowles with just 39 per cent of the vote.

Esther was appalled that a governor could be elected with such a small percentage of the voters. She was determined to do something, and Alaska Common Ground was born. Her letter of invitation to join with her read.

“As a citizen devoted to the people of Alaska and dedicated to “doing the public's business in a public manner”, you are invited to join ALASKA COMMON GROUND and to be an organizing member of this new group. The purpose of ALASKA COMMON GROUND is to provide a forum for Alaskans from all walks of life and all parts of the state to address public policy issues and find areas of agreement. We believe such public discussion and policy agreement are vital to the future of Alaska.”

That organizational meeting was held in the Pioneer School House on October 26, 1991. Forty-seven attended the meeting, some of whom are still members. Then as now, Alaska's fiscal policy and the encouragement of citizen involvement was the major focus of the meeting. There was no question attendees felt that Alaska Common Ground was needed and would be supported.

The first and second forums we held could be titles for forums today – Groping Through the Gap and Should There Be a Constitutional Convention. Sound familiar?

Whither Alaska's fiscal plan

Without question, the bulk of our forums and policy papers have focused on Alaska's growing fiscal problems. Forum panelists over the years have included Governors Hammond, Hickel, Knowles and Sheffield, numerous legislators, many agency folks, and community leaders. Virtually all agreed that Alaska should have a long-term fiscal plan and the sooner the better. There have been very few years that we have not held at least one fiscal forum, several of which were televised statewide. Have they made a difference? It's hard to say, but we will continue to address the issue because it is too important ignore.

Better correction system

We do know that our forums can have a real impact. We joined with Partners for Progress to hold two forums on Cost Effective Justice: New Directions for Prisoner Rehabilitation and Re-entry. We brought Texas Representative Jerry Madden up to share what he had been able to do there to cut costs and yet have a more effective correctional system. He not only took part in our forums, but also went to Juneau to meet with legislators. The late Sen. Johnny Ellis wrote, "It's time we work together, get smart on crime, and bend the corrections cost curve." With Sen. Ellis' leadership, Senate Bill 64-The Omnibus Crime/Correction Bill passed in the next legislative session.

Let's talk

Is it possible to get people of diverse opinions to talk together about difficult issues? Understanding Neighbors did just that. Working with Out North Theater and the Interfaith Alliance of Anchorage, with financial support from the Ford

Foundation's Animating Democracy Initiative, we brought over 100 participants together to talk about the Role of Same-Sex Relationships in Our Community. A participant noted, "People talk different languages. When someone says words like love or understanding or acceptance or hatred, we don't know what it means. We each have our own definition and if there is something called understanding for me it is the ability to listen to another person and try to understand how they perceive things."

The process of Understanding Neighbors was one of growth, not only for the participants but also for the Alaska Common Ground board. As Taylor Brelsford put it, "We spent many hours, several times a month in the planning and implementing of this project. Building relations among the disparate organizations and finding a common perspective among the several strong personalities was challenging but altogether necessary, and ultimately successful. An ambitious project addressing a controversial issue could not come to fruition any other way."

Addressing differences

A project that was near and dear to Esther was addressing the different needs of Urban Alaska and Rural Alaska. We held two forums that nearly filled UAA's Wendy Williamson auditorium. It was exciting to experience the diversity and deep interest in the topic. Alaska is indeed a big state with major cultural differences and lifestyles. The forums pointed out how important it is to understand each other and build better relationships. How can Alaska with such a diverse population, living in small villages and large population centers address the needs of both? Certainly, it requires effective communication and a great deal of respect on both sides.

Say ahh

Health care took center stage when we addressed the Rising

Cost of Health Care with two programs. Alaska costs are partially driven by geography and distance and our small market with little competition. This disparity is higher in Alaska than outside particularly for some specialists, as an example, 43 percent higher for pediatricians and 83 percent higher for cardiologists. The average hospital costs were 38 percent higher here. These figures may be even higher now since the forums was held in 2017 and 2018.

There is no single or simple solution for reducing health care costs. The Alaska Health Care Commission recommended eight core strategies and about 75 specific State policies to address the issue. Among them, medical testing and treatment decisions should be based on the best available evidence of effectiveness. Also, we should change the way we pay for care from payment for individual services to one based on outcomes. The recommendations stress the importance of prevention and support for health choices. and the need to empower individuals and decision-makers with easily accessible information on health care prices, quality, and health outcomes. The Commission noted the Alaska State Legislature has many policy levers that it could pull to help stabilize and even reduce health care prices and overall health spending in our state.

Yes, it's warmer now

Climate change affects Alaska significantly. Our forums brought together major players trying to develop adequate responses to the problem. Erosion, subsidence, flooding, and wildfires are the most obvious impacts but there are many more subtle changes occurring. The forums discussed these and also addressed the things Alaskans can do to at least mitigate the amount of change. We looked at buildings and energy use, land use and transportation, food supply, and solid waste management as ways to make a difference. As is often the case, community action is the key to success.

Let's be smart about travel

From Here to the Future: Transforming Anchorage/Mat-Su Transportation Series focused on how we get around now and in the future. We invited Rollin Stanley, General Manager of Urban Strategy in Calgary, to discuss the technology and demographics of transportation. We then brought Mayor Paul Soglin, from Madison, Wisconsin here who talked to us about a multimodal transportation system for all weather conditions. Both Mayor Soglin and Rollin Stanley met with municipal transportation and land use planners for ways we might improve our systems. We all use and are affected by multiple forms of transportation, so it was appropriate the final program of the series emphasized the importance of public participation in transportation and land use planning.

We have held many more forums ranging from Coping with Y2K to Welfare in Alaska. Go to our website for more information.

In conclusion

Over the years we have worked with many organizations, not the least of which is the League of Women Voters. We greatly appreciate these partnerships. We are grateful for the Anchorage Municipal Library who help publicize our activities and hosted meetings, such as Let's Talk Alaska Dialogue sessions. We were delighted that KTUU/Channel 2 worked with us to produce and air the "We are Alaskans" Public Service Announcements featuring the East High School Swing Choir.

The first resolution the board passed was against holding a Constitutional Convention as being unnecessary, expensive, disruptive, and counterproductive. We take the same position today as we did then as we prepare for another vote on the call for a Constitutional Convention on the ballot this November.

These last three years have certainly been a challenge, but we have learned to use Zoom to reach those outside of the

Anchorage area. We are truly becoming a statewide organization, a realization of Esther's dream.

Unlike most organizations, Alaska Common Ground depends NOT on staff but on its board of directors and talented volunteers to plan and carry out our programs. Our board is a hard-working, dedicated group. We have been fortunate to have the assistance of a part-time support person over the years. Mei Mei Evans was first on the scene. Janet Bidwell came next, and Kari Gardey is with us now. We thank them for their incredible help!

It's been an exciting 30 years! Public policy touches all of us even though we don't give it much thought. Alaska Common Ground continues to be dedicated to the premise that informed citizens can and do make a difference.