Update from the Chair – Fall 2014

We have been busy these past few months and hope that you were able to attend one of our forums or came to our annual meeting last May. As you know, our organization put on five well-attended and well-received forums on Alaska’s important issues. Four of these five non-partisan forums covered the ballot propositions Alaskans voted on this year. The fifth was an all-day event addressing Alaska’s biggest and most complicated problem—the fiscal challenge caused by falling oil production and the threat of oil prices lower than expected.

These events had an extensive reach:

- More than 800 people saw these events in person
- More than 100 listened on audio livestreams
- More people listened and/or viewed these events on Alaska Common Ground’s website
- Thousands more got the chance to see or hear media coverage before or after the forums

Links to the audio and video of each of these five forums are available on this website under Forums.

Along with doing all this in 2014, we also sponsored the Let’s Talk Alaska dialogues on Wednesday evenings and held our annual meeting in May.

Alaska Common Ground was fortunate to have a lot of help in putting on these events. All our forums were co-sponsored by the Anchorage Public Library, the League of Women Voters of Anchorage, the League of Women Voters of Alaska, and Alaska Integrated Media. The University of Alaska’s Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) partnered with us on the Forum on Alaska’s Fiscal Future, which was also co-sponsored by Northrim Bank, First National Bank Alaska, Commonwealth...
North, and C.M. Bidwell and Associates. The co-sponsorship of Alaska Integrated Media (AIM)—a company owning five radio stations—led to the airing of more than 2,000 commercials promoting the forums, significantly increasing our visibility to audiences not typically reached by Alaska Common Ground.

Alaska Common Ground is a small non-profit organization run by and for Alaskans. Most of our work is accomplished by our volunteers—both our board of directors and our members—but some of what we do necessarily costs money. Alaska Common Ground needs money, for example, to pay for advertising for our events and for wages for our part-time staff member. Some of that money comes as grants from institutional sponsors, but most of it comes from individual members like you.

After much consideration—and after not raising the levels for a number of years—Alaska Common Ground has increased the membership levels to reflect the amount and quality of the work we do. This year the membership levels are:

- Individual $50
- Supporter $75
- Contributor $100
- Sustainer $250
- Benefactor $500

In addition, we still offer our $10 membership for a person on a limited budget or a student.

I thank our existing members, and I welcome our new members for their support of Alaska Common Ground and this important work. I urge you to send us a check or go on-line to renew your membership—today. Please consider upgrading your membership category to help Alaska Common Ground to continue to put on high-quality, unbiased events of importance to Alaskans.

Thanks again, and I look forward to seeing you at an Alaska Common Ground event soon.
P.S. One of the accolades for our events making me most proud came from Alaska Dispatch News columnist Mike Dingman. Writing about Ballot Measure No. 1, the oil tax referendum on the August ballot, Dingman commented “…I would encourage you to watch the Alaska Common Ground forum on the topic. That forum is different than most because it was two hours long, and allowed a significant amount of time for the answers to questions and tasked the spokespeople for each side with posing questions to one another.”

Public forum will ask how Alaska’s fiscal future can live with less

Gunnar Knapp and Cliff Groh, October 1st, 2014, Alaska Dispatch News

The debate over oil taxes and recent annual state budget deficits of more than $1 billion have drawn attention to one of the most important and difficult challenges facing Alaska: how we will balance falling oil revenues with growing demands and obligations for state spending.

In recent years oil revenues have accounted for about 90 percent of the state’s unrestricted general fund revenues which pay for most state government services, capital projects, and debt and retirement obligations. Although
nothing about the future is certain, it’s very likely that our oil revenues will decline in the future – because it’s very likely that oil production will fall, and that oil prices won’t rise enough to make up for the decline.

Alaska’s North Slope oil production has been falling for a quarter century – at an average annual rate of 6 percent per year for the past ten years – because production from new fields isn’t enough to offset the decline in production from existing fields. Optimistic forecasts are that new investment might keep North Slope oil production level for a few years – but it’s a lot more likely that production will fall.

For most of the past decade, the effects of falling oil production on state oil revenues were offset by a dramatic increase in oil prices – from $45/barrel in 2005 to $113/barrel in 2012 – as well by as tax changes which increased the state’s share of oil production value. But we can’t count on oil prices to keep rising. Oil prices are driven by global oil supply and demand, and new technologies are driving big increases in global oil production – including production from Lower 48 states. This year’s revenue forecast assumed an average price of $105/barrel, but last week prices were about $95/barrel. For every dollar fall in the average annual oil price, Alaska loses about $90 million in oil revenues.

Regardless about how optimistic you are about future Alaska oil production or prices, it would be foolhardy to deny that our future state oil revenues could decline significantly, or that we need to think about the choices lower oil revenues could force us to face.

[Read more here.](#)
Have questions about Ballot Measure 4? Join the crowd to discuss Bristol Bay

Commentary in Alaska Dispatch News, August 11, 2014
Dick Mylius

Mining in the Bristol Bay region has been a topic for much discussion in recent years. On Nov. 4, Alaskans statewide will vote on the matter, but before then, pros and cons should be considered.

Mining in the Bristol Bay region has been a topic for much discussion in recent years. It has resulted in one statewide ballot initiative in 2008 and a local ballot initiative, Lake and Peninsula Borough, 2011. On Nov. 4, Alaskans statewide will vote on another ballot measure concerning mining in the Bristol Bay area, Ballot Measure 4, one the sponsors have nicknamed “Bristol Bay Forever.”

On Wednesday evening, Alaska Common Ground will host a forum from 7 to 9 p.m. to discuss this ballot measure at the Wilda Marston Theatre at the Loussac Library.

A yes vote on Ballot Measure 4 would establish a state law that requires legislative approval of a future large-scale metallic sulfide mine within the Bristol Bay Fisheries Reserve. The Legislature must find that a “large-scale metallic sulfide mining operation will not constitute danger to the fishery within the Bristol Bay Fisheries Reserve.” The bill defines “large-scale metallic sulfide mining operation” as “a specific mining proposal to extract metals, including gold and copper, from sulfide bearing rock and that would directly disturb 640 or more acres of land.” This legislative approval is in addition to any other required permits or authorizations.
A no vote will keep the status quo, which means that the existing federal, state, and municipal permitting processes will address any future large-scale metallic sulfide mine in the region but the Legislature will not be required to give final approval.

The Bristol Bay Fisheries Reserve is defined as the watersheds that drain into Bristol Bay, roughly from Ugashik Bay north and then west to Kulukak Bay, including the Kvichak-Iliamna Lake, Nushagak, and Naknek river drainages.

The reserve was established by the Legislature in 1972 to address concerns about oil and gas development. The existing reserve only requires legislative approval for oil and gas facilities built in state waters. To date the provision has never been used.

The initiative adds large-scale metallic metal mines to actions requiring legislative approval in the Bristol Bay Fisheries Reserve. It broadens the geographic area to include the entire drainage, not just state-controlled waters. It also applies to lands owned by the state and federal governments and by private entities, including Native corporations.

Until recently, there was uncertainty if the measure would be on the ballot because of questions about whether it was allowable as a topic for an initiative under the Alaska Constitution. On June 23, the Alaska Supreme Court ruled that the initiative could be on the November ballot. Litigation on the separation of powers issue may occur if the initiative passes.

This initiative is not a vote to approve or disapprove a future Pebble Mine. The Pebble deposit is within the reserve and would be a large-scale metallic sulfide mine. If passed, this initiative would require legislative approval at the end of the existing permitting process. To date, Pebble Partnership has not submitted applications to develop a mine.
There are other known mineral deposits within the reserve that could also be subject to this state law.

Panelists advocating in favor of the initiative are Christina Salmon of Igiugig, one of the sponsors, and Anders Gustafson, executive director of the Renewable Resources Coalition.

Panelists advocating a no vote on the initiative are Deanthia Crockett, executive director of the Alaska Miners Association and Richard Hughes, mining engineer/consultant.

We invite you to join us and learn about the pros and cons of this ballot measure so that you can make an informed decision in the voting booth in November. The forum on Wednesday evening is free and open to the public, and there will be time for questions from the audience.

The event is co-sponsored by the Anchorage Public Library, the League of Women Voters of Anchorage, the League of Women Voters of Alaska, and Alaska Integrated Media.

Dick Mylius is former director of the Alaska Department of Natural Resources Division of Mining, Land and Water and is a board member of Alaska Common Ground, a non-profit, member-supported organization dedicated to engaging Alaskans in respectful conversations about major public policy issues facing our state.

Link to the full article here.
Measure 2 will help Alaskans weigh marijuana legalization

Peg Tileston, August 3, 2014, Commentary in the Alaska Dispatch News

OPINION: Ballot Measure 2 centers on a public policy issue that creates interest, emotion, and confusion, and a free public discussion can help voters consider their choice in November. Should Alaska become the third state in the U.S. to legalize recreational marijuana?

The marijuana legalization initiative, Ballot Measure 2, “An act to Tax and Regulate the Production, Sale, and Use of Marijuana,” will be on the Nov. 4 general election ballot. This ballot measure centers on a public policy issue that creates interest, emotion and confusion. If passed, Alaska will be the third state to legalize the production, sale and use of marijuana.

What is the initiative really about? The proposed act is lengthy — eight pages long, consisting of three sections, which would add 17 new statutes and a severability clause to Alaska law. It would make the use of marijuana legal for persons 21 years of age or older. The bill would allow a person to possess, use, buy and grow set amounts of marijuana but would ban public use of marijuana. The bill would make the manufacture, sale and possession of marijuana accessories legal. It would create marijuana establishments including marijuana retail stores, marijuana cultivation facilities, marijuana infused product manufacturers and marijuana testing facilities. The bill would allow localities to ban marijuana establishments but would not prohibit private possession and home cultivation. The bill would require regulations and provide for regulatory oversight, and would establish an excise tax of $50 per ounce on the sale or transfer of
marijuana from a cultivation facility to a retail store or marijuana product manufacturing facility.

What might be the effects if Ballot Measure 2 passed? What might be the outcome if the measure fails?

The marijuana legalization initiative is a multifaceted issue. Some questions include:

- What might be the effects of legalizing marijuana on youth and rural Alaskans?
- Will marijuana legalization improve life and economic opportunities for Alaskans?
- What are the costs to develop regulations and administer the program, and costs to law enforcement?
- What are the estimated tax revenues?
- What is the experience of legalizing marijuana in Colorado and Washington?
- Should we wait to see how it goes in Colorado, Washington and perhaps other states before Alaska legalizes marijuana?

Alaska Common Ground is hosting a free public forum on the marijuana legalization initiative. The forum will present a balanced panel with experts discussing the pros and cons of the initiative. There will be ample opportunity for the public to ask questions of the experts. Veteran Alaska broadcaster Steve MacDonald will moderate the forum.

Panelists supporting the initiative will be Bill Parker, a sponsor of the initiative, a former legislator and a former deputy commissioner of the Alaska Department of Corrections. He will be joined by Taylor Bickford, a spokesman for the organization “Campaign to Regulate Marijuana Like Alcohol in Alaska.”

Panelists opposing the initiative will be Deborah Williams and Kristina Woolston, both with the organization “Big Marijuana. Big Mistake. Vote No on 2.”
Overdue pay boost or job killer?


OPINION: How can voters weigh competing claims about the initiative to change Alaska’s minimum wage that will appear on the November ballot? They can listen and ask questions of two experts who will share different perspectives.

In the Nov. 4 general election, Alaskans will vote “Yes” or “No” on Ballot Measure 3. That’s an initiative to raise Alaska’s minimum wage (set at $7.75 since 2010) to $8.75 on Jan. 1, 2015, and to $9.75 on Jan. 1, 2016. Thereafter, the minimum wage would be adjusted yearly for inflation. In any case, it would stay at least $1 above the federal minimum wage.

Data and studies on the impacts of Alaska’s existing minimum wage law are scarce. The federal minimum wage, however, has been well studied. So have the possible effects of a proposed rise in the federal minimum wage. As you might guess, there are dueling facts and findings. Still, the federal studies suggest some points for Alaska voters to consider.

But first, a few big-picture facts may help frame the issues. The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, record-keeper for the nation’s income statistics, reports that by 2012, post-recession corporate profits had reached an all-time high as a share of total national income. At the same time, the share of wages and salaries had dropped to an all-time low. Profits are up. Wages and salaries are down. Meanwhile, the U.S. Census Bureau finds income inequality has grown much more extreme since 1980. Perhaps these broad trends are why minimum wage
laws are now a live issue for Alaska and several other states and cities.

The Economic Policy Institute, a think-tank, estimated a proposed federal minimum wage increase to $10.10 by mid-2016 would affect 44,000 employees in Alaska. That’s about 15 percent of Alaska’s workforce. Alaska’s smaller proposed increase would likely affect fewer workers.

A recent study by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office supplies findings for both sides. The CBO estimated the proposed federal increase would lift 900,000 persons above the poverty level. The CBO also estimated that 500,000 employees would lose their jobs.

Generally, pro-labor groups and liberal economists favor minimum wage laws. Pro-business groups and conservative economists oppose them. Oddly, both advocates and opponents center their arguments on the impacts on minimum wage workers.

Advocates can point to studies that find minimum wage laws raise incomes for minimum wage and other low-wage workers, with few or no job losses. Advocates also say putting more money in low-income pocketbooks boosts consumer spending and creates new jobs. And better incomes reduce dependency on public income assistance programs.

Opponents counter that higher wages mean higher prices, lost sales, squeezed profits, and, soon, lost jobs. Some opponents also say such laws penalize minimum wage workers in other ways, such as loss of earned income tax credits, higher payroll taxes and reduced eligibility for food stamps and housing and health care subsidies. Additionally, minimum wage laws are ineffective because much of the gain goes to families already above the poverty line.

Alaska Common Ground is co-sponsoring a forum on the minimum wage initiative at the Wilda Marston Theatre in Anchorage’s Loussac Library from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. July 30. Ed Flanagan,
who supports a “Yes” vote, is former commissioner of the Alaska Department of Labor and an initiative sponsor and chair of Alaskans for a Fair Minimum Wage. Dr. Kyle Hampton, who opposes the initiative, is assistant professor of economics at the University of Alaska Anchorage and director of its Center for Economic Education. Audience members will have plenty of time to put questions to the speakers.

The event is free and open to the public. The League of Women Voters of Anchorage, the League of Women Voters of Alaska, the Anchorage Public Library and Alaska Integrated Media are co-sponsors.

Kevin Waring is a board member of Alaska Common Ground, a membership-supported, nonprofit, nonpartisan tax-deductible organization that focuses on fostering understanding and dialogue about Alaska’s public policy issues.

Read the piece in the Alaska Dispatch.

Annual Meeting Report from the Chair

Mary Lu Harle
May 3, 2014

We welcome both longtime members and new members to our 2014 Annual Meeting!

Over the past year, Alaska Common Ground has been working to energize our organization. We have updated our website, www.akcommonground.org, to improve the overall look and the calendar functions, as well as update our content. We continue
to add information on topics of interest to our members and upcoming events. We also have a Facebook page, and are steadily increasing our followers. Please join them by “liking” our page.

During the winter, we held several board sessions devoted to focusing on ways to improve the events and forums we sponsor and to enhance our visibility and membership. We are currently in the midst of a membership campaign to gain new members. Today we are voting on proposed updates to our by-laws and to add two new board members. Finally we are planning four forums for the summer and another major forum in October. Over the past year, we co-sponsored an event with the Alaska World Affairs Council – “I can see Russia from Here: the 25th Anniversary of the Friendship Flight” with panelists Lt. Governor Mead Treadwell, former Governor Steve Cowper and Willie Hensley. We also co-sponsored the Robert Reich film “Inequality for All” with Let’s Talk Anchorage. The Bear Tooth Theater was filled for two evenings that resulted in a great deal of interest and discussion on the film.

Alaska Common Ground continues to support and co-sponsor Let’s Talk Anchorage, which has held a successful series of discussions. Bill Hall, who leads Let’s Talk Anchorage, is leaving the board, but Alaska Common Ground will continue our support and co-sponsorship of this program. It is a great opportunity for citizens to discuss and deliberate issues of the day. All these events can be found on our calendar.

We are pleased to present our program today – an overview of the initiative and referendum processes and an overview of the three initiatives and one referendum that will be on the ballots this year. This panel is a prelude to our Summer Ballot Measure Series, to be held on Wednesdays from 7:00 to 9:00 pm in the Wilda Marston Theater at the Loussac Library. July 23 – Oil Tax Referendum (SB 21 Repeal) July 30 – Minimum Wage Initiative August 6 – Marijuana Legalization Initiative August 13 – Bristol Bay Forever Initiative On Saturday,
October 4, we will present a major all day forum on Alaska’s Fiscal Future, also held at the Wilda Marston Theater at the Loussac Library. We look forward to seeing you at these forums! If you would like to help with planning these events, let us know! We’ll keep you informed as we move forward on them.

Longtime board member Bill Hall is leaving the board, and we thank him for his work on the board and his leadership of Let’s Talk Anchorage. Leonard Lawson resigned from the board earlier this year due to health reasons and we send him our best wishes. We want to thank Alaska Common Ground members who have helped this past year. They have played an important part in our activities. Jenifer Kohout – Program Committee

- Susan Klein – Website Committee
- Karen Hunt – Let’s Talk Anchorage Steering Committee
- Mia Oxley – Let’s Talk Anchorage Steering Committee
- Dick LaFever – Let’s Talk Anchorage Steering Committee
- Bill Falsey – Event planning
- Taylor Brelsford – Annual meeting panelist and event planning
- Harry Crawford – Annual meeting panelist

Our great thanks go to the Stoel-Rives Law Firm for generously allowing ACG to use their conference room, their telephone and refreshments for our board meetings. Our thanks also go to the Anchorage Public Libraries for co-sponsoring our upcoming forums and providing the venue for them. We offer a big cheer and thank you to our staff support, Kari Gardey. She takes care of ACG work, keeps us on track, and makes us look good! Finally we thank you, our members, for your continued support. You are the heart of Alaska Common Ground! We hope you will visit our webpage (www.akcommonground.org) and our Facebook page and stay in touch with us!
Are you concerned about democracy in Alaska today?

Do you believe that Alaskans have many great ideas worth sharing? Are you concerned about our current polarized city and state governments? Is respectful dialogue and exchanging of ideas a better way to solve problems?

If you believe these things, Alaska Common Ground invites you to join us!

Alaska Common Ground was founded in 1991 by committed Alaskans seeking an engaged Alaskan democracy. The founders included Esther Wunnicke, Wilda Hudson, and Peg Tileston. Over the years we have addressed many issues such as state fiscal management, cost-effective justice, ballot propositions, and re-districting.

We invite you to join us and support this work. Become a member!

At Alaska Common Ground we work to build better understanding of important public policy issues facing Alaska through:

- Public forums and debates on policy issues of concern to Alaskans
- Group dialogues on issues of community interest
- Reports, recommendations, and media presentations

This summer we will focus on the three ballot initiatives and one referendum that will be on the August primary ballot. Our annual meeting at the Mountain View Library on May 3 will provide an overview of each initiative and referendum on the August 19 ballot. We will hold longer forums in the Marston
Theatre in the Loussac Library on each of these ballot measures on four consecutive Wednesdays – July 23, 30, August 6 and 13 – all from 7 to 9 p.m.

Mark your calendars and join these discussions!

We also co-sponsor weekly Let’s Talk Anchorage dialogues on topics of community interest with the Anchorage Public Library. These discussions are held each Wednesday from 6-8 p.m. in the Ann Stevens Room at the Loussac. Come join the discussion!

We invite you to become a member of Alaska Common Ground to learn about, discuss, and deliberate on important issues that Alaskans are talking about!

Let’s make Alaska an informed, engaged democracy!

Alaska Common Ground’s Board Of Directors

October 2013

As we transition from one season to the next in Alaska, so too we are experiencing transitions in Alaska Common Ground. After many years as Chair of the Board of Directors, Peg Tileston has stepped down. Happily however, she continues on the board and has assumed leadership of the Program Committee to direct the development and planning of Alaska Common Ground’s events. I am endeavoring to fill her big shoes as the current chair. As we move forward, we are looking to our membership for your continued support of our vision and our programs.
As a follow-up to the board’s strategic planning session last year, we have updated Alaska Common Ground’s Vision and Mission statements, our brochure, and are updating our website. We will let you know when the new website is up and running! We are also strengthening partnerships with other organizations to plan and present informative and engaging programs. We have a Facebook page, and for those of you on Facebook, we welcome you to “like” us! We are using this page and our website to stay connected with you and the community and to let you know of our programs and related events and to encourage discussion of public policy issues.

Regarding programs, at our May annual meeting we held an informative and interesting panel discussion on the importance of early childhood education. The panel included representatives from the Anchorage School District, Best Beginnings and the Alaska Legislature. We also welcomed suggestions from members for future forums and discussions and are now working to implement these ideas.

On November 1st, we are co-sponsoring a program with the Alaska World Affairs Council entitled I Can See Russia from Here: A Celebration of the Friendship Flight and 25 Years of an Open Border Between Two World Superpowers. Speakers are Former Governor Steve Cowper, Willie Hensley, and Lt. Governor Mead Treadwell. The program is Friday, November 1st at the Hilton Hotel. See www.alaskaworldaffairs.org for more information.

We are starting to plan programs and events for the winter and spring, so stay tuned for more information! We are also looking toward holding sessions during the summer on the state initiatives that will be on the August ballot. We would love to have you help us plan and hold our events. Please contact us at info@akcommonground.org if you are interested.

Let’s Talk Anchorage, a collaborative program of Alaska Common Ground and the Anchorage Public Libraries is moving forward.
This program seeks to engage citizens in thoughtful discussion of current affairs. Weekly facilitated dialogs will be held Tuesdays from 6:00-8:00 pm in the Ann Stevens Room at the Loussac Library. The third week of each month is reserved for UAA to hold discussions. We will post the weekly topics on our website and Facebook page and welcome you to join these dialogs!

As always, we invite your ideas and suggestions for forums and programs and we would love to have your participation as we plan our programs. You are always welcome to attend our board meetings on the 3rd Wednesday of each month. You can find us at our website, www.akcommonground.org, on Facebook at our Alaska Common Ground page, or contact info@akcommonground.org. We’ll do our best to keep you informed, and hope you will stay engaged with us as well.

As you renew your membership with us please let us know if you would prefer to receive your renewal electronically. We are happy to continue mailing out the renewals but know that some of you might prefer receiving them via email. Contact Kari at info@akcommonground.org and she will send your renewal in the format you prefer.

Thank you for your continued support of Alaska Common Ground. It is what keeps us energized to present relevant and informative programs, and also supports us financially.

Mary Lu Harle, Chair
Alaska Common Ground Board of Directors