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Governor clears desks at Alaska DOT | Juneau Empire

KATIE MORITZ

6-7 minutes

• Commissioner, other executives are fired • Deputy commissioner will serve as interim chief

Just days after defending the Juneau Access Improvements Project to Gov. Bill Walker, Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities Acting Commissioner Pat Kemp was removed from his position, Walker spokeswoman Grace Jang confirmed. Two other high-level officials in the department also were removed from their posts.

Walker recently cut funding from the longstanding Juneau Road and the Knik Arm Crossing, among other megaprojects. Kemp issued a response Friday, writing that halting the Road project could force the state to pay back millions to the Federal Highway Administration, the main funder of the Road extension. He was asked to step down Monday.

“Governor Walker wants all commissioners, deputy commissioners and directors to be aligned with his decisions and policies,” Jang said in an email.

Kemp’s non-permanent replacement is DOT Deputy

Commissioner John Binder, who was promoted to that post from within the department in December 2013.

Jang said the governor will appoint a permanent DOT commissioner before the end of the month.

DOT Deputy Commissioner Reuben Yost and Southcoast Regional Director Al Clough were also asked by the governor to step down, department spokesman Jeremy Woodrow said. Walker had asked for their resignations when he took office and officially accepted them Monday, Woodrow said.

“They serve at the pleasure of the governor, and it’s the governor’s decision,” he said.

Kemp was appointed commissioner by former Gov. Sean Parnell in 2012, having worked his way up the ranks in the department since 1971. He told the Empire on Monday by phone that he had informed Parnell of his plans to retire at the end of November, but Walker had asked him to extend his stay at the department in 30-day increments.

“They called today and said, ‘It’s time,’” Kemp said.

Kemp said he was surprised to learn that his memo about the Juneau Road and the Knik Arm Crossing “wasn’t aligned with the governor’s priorities.”

“That memo I sent out was just a factual memo, there wasn’t any editorial stuff in there, we just gave facts, so that was a little bit surprising,” Kemp said. “(The Road) project’s been around for a while and all the previous governors supported it and this one apparently doesn’t and that’s just what happens when someone takes over.”

The Road project has experienced stops and starts throughout the years as governors have come and gone. Former Gov. Tony Knowles was the last to put the kibosh on the Lynn Canal Highway; the administrations after him exhumed the project.

Walker said in a September interview that he would review all large projects if elected and potentially cut them from the budget. Kemp said he and Walker never talked about why the new governor wasn't on board.

"We've never had that dialogue," Kemp said. "I gave him that memo, I thought we would talk and hash things out, and that didn't happen."

So far, \$25.7 million in federal funding has been spent on Road planning, research and design, according to the documents Kemp submitted to Pat Pitney, director of the state's Office of Management and Budget.

"Canceling the project without bringing it to a conclusion may result in the state owing the federal government all federal funds expended on the project," states a document attached to the memo from Kemp to Pitney.

The FHWA funding that would be used to build the Road requires only a 10 percent match from state general funds. To date, the project has been allocated \$48 million in state general funds and \$154 million in federal dollars, Woodrow said in a past Empire report. The state needs to dedicate only \$9 million more for the project to be fully funded, according to DOT.

Kemp said even if speaking up for the controversial project was what pushed him into retirement, he stands by the work the

department has done on the Road and says the state “has plenty of money to fund it.” He said he doesn’t know if the Road will ever be completed.

“It’s one of the most important projects in the state,” he said. “It will save the state hundreds of millions of dollars when that road is built all the way to Skagway. The people who don’t want the road are pulling out all the stops and it’s been a difficult process. It should be built, it’s a good project. ... The ferry system just takes a lot of money to operate and move people, and roads can do it cheaper and haul more people.”

Kemp doesn’t know what will come next in his life, but he said he doesn’t have hard feelings about what went down.

“I retired before (in 2006) and I came back for the department,” he said. “It’s just time to go again, and everything’s fine.”

Kemp was one of three commissioners Walker held over from Parnell’s administration. The others are the Department of Education and Early Development’s Mike Hanley and the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs’ Adjutant General Mike Bridges. Hanley was permanently appointed recently and Bridges, who also leads the Alaska Army National Guard, is still in temporary “acting” status until Walker decides if he will hire one of five candidates suggested to him by Parnell, or if he will conduct his own candidate search.

Kemp was also one of very few of Walker’s commissioners to live in the capital city full time. Now, only Hanley and Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development Acting Commissioner Fred Parady remain.

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