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Gov. Murkowski should put cards on the table in gas line decisions

Gov. Frank Murkowski is known as someone who keeps his cards close to his chest. This is fine in poker when you gamble your own money, but it's very dangerous when it's other folks' assets put at risk. Murkowski claims he was victorious in crafting a deal with three big oil companies to build a natural gas pipeline through Canada but now says he won't disclose what's in the deal. Until we see otherwise, it appears he's gambling public assets and also claiming to have won the game while refusing to put all the cards on the table to prove it.

Not only is the governor's gas line contract still unavailable for scrutiny, but newly introduced legislation puts the public at even greater risk by eliminating our opportunity for fair assessments of what went into the governor's decisions to strike this deal through a foreign country.

In Juneau, Senate Bill 316 and House Bill 502 are proposed to alter the grounds for judicial review of the "best interest finding" used to support the governor's gas line decisions. Murkowski must justify his contract decisions, and the Stranded Gas Act is the document he uses to do so.

Currently, Alaskans are able to challenge the best interest finding if the governor's contract is, for instance, developed illegally or not supported by fact. This judicial review process affords the public access to supporting documents used to create the best interest finding.

SB 316 and HB 502 remove the public's ability to challenge the legal and factual basis of the best interest finding and restrict it to challenges on constitutional grounds only.

The governor is unfairly replacing the unbiased decision making of the court with the political decision making of the Legislature. This isn't even fair to legislators. Checks and balances protect them, and us, when the public has access to all three branches of government. This law would tip the scales to favor a governor over the public.

This attempt to potentially thwart our checks and balances through judicial review is eerily reminiscent of the only other time I remember the public being denied the best interest finding process, which was the Mat-Su's coal bed methane program. That had disastrous results. Mat-Su's experience should be our learning tool when weighing public approval of politicians' attempts to eliminate judicial review. We're wise to learn from that failed attempt.

As a resident of the Mat-Su and as chairwoman of the Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission around that time, I remember it was bad for the public then. So why is it good for all Alaskans now?

The best interest finding is how the public can ask Gov. Murkowski if what he negotiated is legal, and if what he's saying is factual.

In my opinion, it looks like the governor is rushing a change through the Legislature that keeps the public from asking, "What if this Canadian deal is not legal and not supported by fact?"

SB 316 and HB 502 would allow the governor to essentially fire the public before we can get answers to the same questions the Natural Resources Commissioner Tom Irwin was asking before he got canned for speaking about the questionable legalities of the gas line negotiations.

Judicial review is an important part of the gas line deal and the public needs to weigh in on the idea of giving up a tool that allows checks and balances. There may be disagreement with my interpretation of the intent of SB 316 and HB 502, but I lived through and learned from the coal bed methane issue as a resident and state regulator, and I base my opinion on that experience.

There's so much at risk with the secret gas line deal. We want to trust government leaders while they're at the table dealing with multinational oil companies that make mind-boggling profits off resources owned by all Alaskans. Tweaking the judicial review process leads one to believe we're not playing with a full deck.

Sarah Palin is former chairwoman of the Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission and former mayor of the city of Wasilla. She is also a Republican candidate for governor.