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Story last updated at 2:32 p.m. Thursday, January 30, 2003

## Lease sale ball bounces into assembly's court

Last week's public hearings on proposed oil and gas lease sales for lower Cook Inlet provided a study in democracy in action. The hearings, conducted in Seldovia, Homer and Kenai, were significant in bringing grass-roots feedback into the decision-making process.

What the federal government, through its agent, the Minerals Management Service, does with the feedback remains to be seen. Given the diversity of the testimony -- Kachemak Bay residents expressed overwhelming opposition, while their central peninsula counterparts turned out in force to express their approval -- it would seem the MMS has a monumental task ahead of it in trying to find a balance acceptable to both sides of the debate.

Emotions ran high at both hearings last week. In some cases, perhaps too high. What should have been a healthy exchange of ideas degenerated at times into name-calling and a spirit of intolerance on the part of residents of the central and lower peninsula. When the dust had finally settled, a clear "us and them" mind-set had emerged, threatening to drive a wedge between Homer- and Kenai-area residents.

The rift poses a problem, as well, to the Kenai Peninsula Borough Assembly and Mayor Dale Gorton. The Bagley administration has already expressed its full support for the lower Cook Inlet lease sale. It appears to be unconcerned about the opposition. Bagley discounted the Homer-area testimony and the orchestration of single-minded environmentalists at Cook Inlet Keeper. He also defended the testimony of Kenai-area residents, saying hard feelings are natural when people see their lives threatened.

Apparently, the hard feelings of Homer-area folks, who see their quality of life threatened, are of equal concern to the mayor. Nor is the city council's unanimous opposition. After all, we have done so handsomely, he says, from oil and gas money over the years.

We understand how a community that grew because of oil development wants to preserve the stability of their economy. Bagley and others may not understand the historical opposition to oil development down here, dissent that predates the Keeper by more than 20 years. If the Keeper's orchestration of opposition, then it leads a symphony of Carnegie Hall-caliber first-chair musicians.

Our central peninsula neighbors also may not appreciate the losses suffered by many of our residents in the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill. In some cases, oil development didn't just threaten livelihoods; it destroyed them.

A resolution in support of the lease sale goes before the borough assembly at its Tuesday meeting. We urge the assembly to pull the resolution from the consent agenda and give it further consideration. If not doing so, the mayor and assembly, who represent all borough residents, run the risk of alienating a sizable segment of the population.

Beyond that, all peninsula residents should consider how we can better understand each other and how we can create new energy industries that minimize risk to the environment. BP's pioneer "whisper" plant at Nikiski -- which turns natural gas into clean fuel -- is a good start.

All Kenai Peninsula residents share common values -- a love for our land, a desire to keep our communities prosperous -- that should bring us together. We should not let our passions divide us.

-- *Mark Kelsey, editor;*

*Gary Thomas, publisher.*

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