

Murkowski has fought long, hard battle for Alaska

By Liz Ruskin Anchorage Daily News (Published: October 27, 2002)

Washington -- Frank Murkowski is no stranger to success and good fortune.

The son of a Ketchikan banker, he grew up to become a banker himself and rose steadily through the executive ranks.

At 32, he became the youngest member of Gov. Wally Hickel's cabinet.

He has been married for 48 years, has six grown children and is, according to his annual financial disclosures, a very wealthy man.

He breezed through three re-elections.

But in the Senate, his road hasn't always been so smooth.

He is seen in Washington as an unyielding champion of Alaska resource extraction -- "ferociously pro-development," as Time magazine put it -- whose greatest political assets are persistence and force of will.

"Little comes easily for him, in part because he often is unwilling to change positions," reads part of the entry on him in the Politics in America almanac.

When asked about his Senate accomplishments, Murkowski turns to an aide who hands out a 12-page list.

"Won repeal of the North Slope oil export ban," reads one item.

"Won additional Medicaid health care aid for Alaska (\$200 million over five years) by winning key formula change."

"Helped encourage Federal Express to locate and expand at Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport."

Of course, it's Alaska's other senator for whom that airport is named. By virtue of his seniority and committee assignment, Stevens has been able to send billions of dollars back home. That has tended to overshadow Murkowski's Senate career.

Alaska Congressman Don Young says the federal money flowing to the state is testimony to Murkowski's greatness as a team member.

"Sen. Stevens gets great credit for it. And he should. But you can't do that without the cooperation and working with Sen. Murkowski." Young said. "That's something people don't quite understand."

Both Stevens, who has had his differences with Murkowski over the years, and Young want Murkowski elected governor so they can continue the struggle that has marked all of their tenures: beating back the environmentalists to further develop Alaska's economy.

"Frank is willing to take them on, as we have here," Stevens said. "We have taken them on. We need

a governor who will take them on."

Murkowski said he feels an obligation to return to Alaska to, as he puts it, get the state's economy moving again.

Some of his critics say he can best help the state by staying put. But when he announced his candidacy last year, Murkowski revealed he doesn't see a bright future for himself in the Senate.

He was forced out of his chairmanship of the powerful Senate Energy Committee when the Democrats took the Senate last year. Even if Republicans win back the Senate, Murkowski said, he would have to wait at least eight years before he could take command of another committee.

"My point is, in my particular sequence of seniority, I have no other committee that I can look forward to the chairmanship (of) for some time," he said at the time.

LIKES A GOOD JOKE

Murkowski's record in recent years has earned him perfect scores from the National Right to Life Committee, the Christian Coalition, the American Conservative Union and the National Rifle Association.

He has earned perfect zeroes from Planned Parenthood, the League of Conservation Voters and the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence.

Though he is best known for pushing for oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and other state issues, he has also been one of the Senate's most prominent advocates of storing the nation's nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain, Nev., making him a hero to the nuclear power industry.

"I think nuclear energy has a place in assisting the environment in air quality," he said in an interview.

He inherited the responsibility once he became chairman of the Senate Energy Committee.

"It just goes with the committee," he said. "I had no constituency in it."

He has amassed large campaign treasuries for his re-elections, thanks largely to contributions from the oil industry and other energy sectors.

On Capitol Hill, Murkowski is congenial, friendly with his colleagues and likely to include a little joke or self-effacing anecdote to lighten his oratories.

When he finds a line he likes, he sticks with it.

"You and I do not move in an out of Washington, D.C., on hot air, although occasionally there is quite a bit of it here," he often said in arguing for more oil development.

A search of the Congressional Record shows he has repeated the "hot air" quip 15 times from the floor of the Senate in the past year and many more times in press conferences and hearings.

Despite his generally affable presentation, he can become imperious when aggravated. He occasionally criticizes his staff in front of other people, though in a

tone just light enough to suggest he might be joking.

"On a one-to-one basis he's highly personable," says former Alaska attorney general Charlie Cole, who has known Murkowski for 25 years.

JUMPING INTO POLITICS

Frank Hughes Murkowski was born in Seattle in 1933. Nine years later, he and his parents moved to Ketchikan, where his father became executive vice president of First National Bank of Ketchikan.

A tall boy, he played basketball in high school and then went off to college in California. There he became better acquainted with Nancy Gore, who was a year ahead of him in Ketchikan High School.

They married in 1954, while he was earning an economics degree from Seattle University, and soon started a family. They had six children: Carol, Lisa, Michael, Mary, Eileen and Brian.

His first big break in politics came with a phone call in 1966. He had just climbed up a rung at the National Bank of Alaska, leaving a job as Wrangell branch manager to become a vice president in Anchorage. Wally Hickel, the new governor, asked him to be commissioner of economic development for the young state.

Hickel said he didn't know Murkowski well at the time but was predisposed to liking him.

As Hickel tells it, Hickel had gone to Ketchikan a dozen years earlier when he was campaigning for a spot on the Republican National Committee. The morning after a speech to the townsfolk, a grandfatherly gentleman came to his door.

"Young man, I liked what you had to say," the older fellow said. It was Lester Gore, a territorial judge and Murkowski's future father-in-law, come to lend a hand.

"We went up one side of town and down the other, and he introduced me to everybody," Hickel said, noting that he won Ketchikan in every election thereafter.

Hickel hadn't forgotten that kindness when he met Frank Murkowski during Hickel's first run for governor.

"He was a young, bright guy. I figured he was going places," Hickel said. "And the fact that he married a Gore girl, that really impressed me."

Hickel describes Murkowski as a straightforward fellow who shares Hickel's belief that the governor of Alaska is the "foreman of the ranch," the manager of the resource wealth.

After Hickel left to become President Nixon's Interior Secretary, Murkowski resigned from his state appointment and ran for the U.S. House. He won the Republican nomination but lost to Democrat Nick Begich in the general election.

It was a gut punch to a career that thus far had been studded with success and advancement.

Murkowski was 37. He had six kids. He wasn't

certain he wanted to go back into banking, and with the holidays approaching, it wasn't a great time to be looking for a job.

He and Nancy piled all six kids into a Volkswagen bus and drove to Mexico.

"I remember we had a football and a hibachi and we just kept driving," he told a reporter years later.

If he was rudderless in that moment, it wasn't for long.

Within months he was named president of the Alaska National Bank of the North in Fairbanks.

BACK INTO POLITICS

Murkowski stayed with the bank for nine years before he tried politics again. In 1980, he took on U.S. Sen. Mike Gravel.

At least he thought that's whom he was taking on.

Gravel, as it happened, was knocked out in the Democratic primary.

So instead of confronting a 12-year incumbent, Murkowski faced Clark Gruening, grandson of former Alaska Sen. Ernest Gruening.

"Clark had tremendous name identification, but what I did have was an association having lived in many areas of Alaska, and that made a big difference," Murkowski said recently.

The race was described in the press as a contest between two nice guys who were slow to start slugging.

One day in late September, Murkowski was primed to take the gloves off. According to the press release he issued in advance, he intended to call Gruening a liberal and a die-hard environmentalist in a speech to the Eagle River Rotary Club.

He didn't quite get around to it.

"Did I purposely skip the part where I was going to call him an extreme environmentalist?" Murkowski pondered when a reporter approached him after the speech. "No, I don't think so. I just hate to read speeches, and I guess I just got away from the text in that part and forgot to get back to it."

Neither candidate seemed to be setting the electorate ablaze.

Gravel had been a showman, capturing the Senate spotlight with what his critics said were publicity stunts.

But Murkowski, wrote then-Daily News columnist John Greely, "seemed to be going after votes with all the vigor of a teller asking for I.D. at the night deposit window."

In the last weeks of the campaign, though, Murkowski got much tougher and managed to firmly affix the "no growther" label on Gruening.

Murkowski trounced the Democrat.

It was the first time the state sent an all-Republican team to Congress, and in 22 years the lineup hasn't changed.

RECURRING ACCUSATION

Starting with that 1980 campaign, Murkowski has been intermittently dogged by the claims of a Native corporation that its finances were ruined by the bank that Murkowski ran in Fairbanks.

"I'm kind of surprised that in all the elections we've had it comes up again and again, because it certainly doesn't represent any reflection on my career," he said recently.

The short version is that Bering Straits Native Corporation, the bank's largest client, lost millions of dollars in an array of bad investments in the 1970s. Some of that money was held in trust for one of the village corporations in its region, Sitnasauk Native Corp.

As Murkowski was campaigning in 1980, the Native groups alleged the bank had mismanaged their trust account and induced them to guarantee bad loans to another company so the bank could recover money that company already owed it.

"I'm tired of hearing about somebody having this or that about me," Murkowski said at the time. "If somebody has something, let's see it, instead of just perpetuating these rumors."

For a while, it looked like a scandal was emerging that might explode on Murkowski's campaign.

The New York Times wrote a story. Mike Wallace and a team of "60 Minutes" researchers had come to investigate.

Then in October 1980, Bering Straits and Sitnasauk filed a lawsuit against the bank.

But nothing ever stuck on Murkowski, who was an ex-banker by the time the allegations unfolded.

"It's the bank's problem now. We suggest you go talk to the bank," a campaign spokesman said when the lawsuit was filed.

With the election a month away, all that was clear was that the case was complex and that it wouldn't be decided anytime soon.

In fact, it wasn't until seven years later that a judge finally ruled. Superior Court Judge Mark Rowland hit the bank with a \$10 million judgment, saying the bank had engaged in conflicts of interest and violated federal regulations that allowed Sitnasauk's trust money to be squandered.

By then Murkowski had already been sworn in for a second term.

"The judgment occurred four (bank) presidents later and eight years after I left," Murkowski said recently.

He has always maintained that Bering Straits, which dropped out of the lawsuit, made its own investment decisions.

These days Murkowski refers questions about the case to Charlie Cole, the attorney who defended the bank at trial.

Cole said the judge's decision boiled down to a

finding that the bank's trust department should not have allowed Bering Straits so much leeway with the village corporation's money.

"The trust department is in the same bank, but it's independent of the loan management," Cole said. "I suppose at the end of the day the buck stops with the president of all these financial institutions. But Frank Murkowski wasn't a lawyer. Would Frank Murkowski be expected to know the nuances of those legal obligations of the trust department?"

BATTLING THE ENVIRONMENTALISTS

The arena for Murkowski's battles with environmentalists has often been the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

"He had so many Alaska issues," said retired Sen. J. Bennett Johnston, a Louisiana Democrat who was the committee chairman until 1995. "I always knew there were a lot of Alaska issues, but I didn't know there were so many. He'd keep bringing them up and bringing them up."

Murkowski reached the height of his power in Washington when he succeeded Johnston as chairman in 1995. He led the committee until June 2001.

He went into the job with an ambitious agenda for Alaska, says Jim Waltman of The Wilderness Society.

"Izembek (road), helicopters in wilderness, snowmobiles at Denali and on and on and on, all at the same time and all full-throated," Waltman said. "He pushed so many bills, so many issues at us, and got relatively little accomplished."

About a quarter of the items on Murkowski's 12-page list of accomplishments cast Murkowski in a supporting role, some of them in massive Washington dramas.

"Helped craft the nation's first balanced budget in 30 years," the list reads.

"Helped craft welfare reform act."

"Helped craft comprehensive overhaul of IRS, creating taxpayer advocates."

The list also includes many measures he authored that became law -- a number of land exchanges, buy-backs and give-aways, construction projects, and generous financial assistance for Alaska communities.

"He was particularly involved in the area of the small explorers, small developers, small activities for our state in terms of minerals and metals and oil and gas," Stevens said, when asked about Murkowski's Senate achievements.

But Murkowski lost to the environmentalists on the most prominent battles.

He was unable to expand logging in the Tongass National Forest, which he saw as vital to the economy of the town he grew up in and other Southeast communities.

"All this is gone now," he said recently, showing a visitor to his office a framed painting of the Ketchikan

Pulp Co. mill, with a log raft in the foreground and the plant's chimneys emitting white plumes.

The plant closed in 1997.

His most prominent loss may be the failure to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling, an effort he led.

Congress may still pass a national energy bill if it returns after the election for a lame-duck session, but it looks highly unlikely that ANWR will be in it.

"We were one vote short," Murkowski laments.

He tried to show that a lot of constituencies unions, seniors, Jews, women business owners also wanted drilling. He held a series of press conferences in front of the Capitol to show that they stood with him.

He also went to the Senate floor dozens of times to make his case.

Waltman said he certainly tried hard, but he also tested the patience of his fellow senators, Waltman said.

"In the end I think it helped us that he had over the previous decade spent so much of Senate's time on this issue," Waltman said. "At some point senators get tired of hearing about it."

Murkowski and his supporters say that if President Clinton hadn't vetoed it in 1995 or if the Democrats hadn't taken over the Senate this year, ANWR would be open already.

The reason it's not is because of the strength of the opposition, they say, not because Murkowski's efforts were deficient.

"Nobody can ever fault Frank for not having tried on ANWR," Stevens said.

Reporter Liz Ruskin can be reached at 1-202-383-0007 or lruskin@adn.com

PHOTOS

Gubernatorial candidates Sen. Frank Murkowski and Lt. Gov. Fran Ulmer shared a handshake and a smile after their KTUU-sponsored debate Wednesday evening at the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts. (Photo by Erik Hill / Anchorage Daily News)

Outside the Senate chambers in the U.S. Capitol in May, Sen. Frank Murkowski paused to give last-minute instructions to an aide. Murkowski was voting on the confirmation of several federal circuit court judges. (Photo by Jim Lavrakas / Anchorage Daily News)

Striding to a vote in the Capitol in May, Murkowski was flanked by Anchorage's Jim Jansen, left, president and CEO of Lynden Inc., and Carl Marrs, president and CEO of Cook Inlet Region Inc. (Photo by Jim Lavrakas / Anchorage Daily News)

Katherine Bigler, 74, of Willow was one of the first to approach Murkowski during an August campaign stop at a hardware store on the Parks Highway in Willow. Bigler says she thinks Murkowski would be an excellent governor, but she told him she was concerned that a suitable replacement be found for

him in the U.S. Senate. (Photo by Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News)

Riding the Senate subway from the Hart Building over to the U.S. Capitol in May, Murkowski goes over his daily schedule with press secretary Chuck Kleeschulte. (Photo by Jim Lavrakas / Anchorage Daily News)

At his Hart Building office in Washington, D.C., Murkowski uses a stand-up desk, a practice that he developed as a bank president before he became a senator 21 years ago. His personal secretary, Kristen Daimler, enters the office behind him. (Photo by Jim Lavrakas / Anchorage Daily News)

Longtime political partners Murkowski and Sen. Ted Stevens answered questions from Anchorage supporters at a luncheon in May. (Photo by Jim Lavrakas / Anchorage Daily News)

Copyright © 2008 The Anchorage Daily News (www.adn.com)

Ulmer's career covers gamut of state government

By Don Hunter Anchorage Daily News (Published: October 27, 2002)

Fran Ulmer's ascent in Alaska politics has been sure, steady and nearly seamless since she arrived here almost 30 years ago.

Ulmer was 26 then, an attorney recently graduated from the University of Wisconsin's law school. She had worked for the Federal Trade Commission in Washington, D.C., but Ulmer says a friend's descriptions of Juneau were too attractive to ignore for a young woman who had grown up at the edge of a marsh in southern Wisconsin.

Ulmer started her career in Alaska drafting bills for legislators. Before long, she moved into the executive branch, working as Gov. Jay Hammond's legislative liaison before stepping up to head Hammond's department of policy development and planning.

When Hammond's second term was up, Ulmer launched her own political career, running for mayor of Juneau in a five-way race. In an outcome even Ulmer called a surprise, she won in a landslide, outpolling all four opponents combined and taking 56 percent of the vote.

Three years later, she ran for state House in Juneau's District 4. She handily defeated two fellow Democrats in the primary, then swamped Republican Red Swanson by a 2-1 ratio in the general.

Three re-elections later, in 1994, Ulmer ran for lieutenant governor, securing the nomination as Tony Knowles' running mate and joining him, after a recount, in a more traditional Alaska landslide -- they edged

Republicans Jim Campbell and Mike Miller by fewer than 600 votes out of more than 213,000 cast.

And eight years after that, Ulmer's name tops the ticket as the Democratic candidate for governor.

FISHER, SHOOTER, HUNTER, SINGER

Ulmer's interests and skills are broad. She sings, she fishes, she shoots, she delivers off-the-cuff answers to complicated questions as if she were reading from a script.

About 3,000 people lived in the town where Ulmer grew up in the 1950s. Horicon, Wis., borders a 32,000-acre marsh -- now a national wildlife refuge -- and Ulmer says she learned to fish and hunt as a girl. She was a musician; she played flute in the school band and began taking voice classes at the Milwaukee Conservatory of Music at the age of 15. She has a strong, clear mezzo-soprano, which she has used to deliver "Alaska's Flag" and the "Star-Spangled Banner" at political and sporting events as well as in roles with the Juneau Lyric Opera.

Ulmer earned bachelor's degrees in political science and economics at the University of Wisconsin and graduated with honors from the university's law school. In Alaska, she married Bill Council, a former state attorney now in private practice. They have two adult children.

Scott Foster was Hammond's press secretary in the 1970s. Today he's the public information officer at the University of Alaska Southeast. Recently, he watched Ulmer take part in a candidate debate at the university. It brought back memories.

"It reminded me of times when I would be sitting in the governor's office and listening to debates among the commissioners," Foster said. "I remember (Hammond's attorney general) Av Gross and Fran Ulmer having this phenomenal skill to summarize and clarify positions and present rational reasons for the positions they were taking."

Those were heady days. Alaska had been a state for less than 20 years. Congress had passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act three years before Hammond's first term commenced. Battles raged in Juneau and Washington over what would happen, or would be allowed to happen, with the vast majority of Alaska in federal ownership. Construction of the trans-Alaska oil pipeline had drawn thousands of workers to the state and injected a rich stream of Outside money into the state's economy. Ulmer, one of the state's newest residents, was in the thick of all those issues, Foster and Gross said.

"Anything dealing with the Legislature, Fran was involved in," Foster said. "D2, a big debate over developing farming in Delta, using royalty oil and perhaps selling it."

D2 is a reference to a section in ANCSA that authorized the U.S. secretary of interior to set aside up

to 80 million acres of federal lands as national parks, wildlife refuges, and wild and scenic river systems. Mining and other forms of development would not be allowed there. The newly formed Native regional corporations would not be allowed to select lands there under ANCSA.

"Those were the bills that resolved how federal lands were to be allocated in Alaska, what was to be put into parks, refuges, and what parts were not, (and) what was to be the state's role in managing federal lands," Gross said. "She played a key role; she was one of the people in the administration, there were like three or four, who ranged across all the issues. . . . She was involved in most things in the Hammond administration, from (creating) the Permanent Fund to developing the position on federal lands."

Hammond's second term ended in 1982. Ulmer ran for mayor of Juneau in 1983.

It was a rockin' time in Southeast. In the 1982 statewide election, voters had defeated a proposal to move the state capital, a shift that would have sucked away thousands of jobs and sent Juneau's economy into a tailspin.

The vote re-energized the town. Real estate prices jumped by a third and development exploded. Ulmer ran for mayor with an action plan aimed at transportation and public safety improvements and giving residents more of a say in city decisions.

There were specifics: Ulmer told voters she wanted to expand bus service and build sidewalks. She also wanted to build a downtown parking garage on the waterfront. She wanted to establish neighborhood councils and expand public hearings, and she promised to make herself available to residents for a few hours every day.

"We seemed to have a lot more meetings, and we definitely got more public input" after Ulmer's election, former Juneau Assemblyman Richard Poor said.

Not everyone on the Assembly warmed to that change right away, Poor said, but Ulmer was persuasive and was a good listener. In Juneau's city manager form of government, the mayor is a figurehead, a slightly more influential member of the Assembly.

"Shortly after the capital move vote, development here was going crazy," said Peter Freer, another assemblyman. "Fran was a big fan of toughening the borough's zoning and subdivision standards."

Juneau residents and state workers had a laundry list of needs. One of them was finding a place to park.

"Our first priority was building a downtown parking garage," Freer said. "It was controversial because of its location on the waterfront. She decided we were going to push ahead, find a location and build it."

A FAMILIAR TAX DEBATE

In 1986, Ulmer's ambitions grew again. She ran for

the state House and won. She was sworn in in the middle of what Gov. Steve Cowper, among other people, was calling a fiscal crisis.

World oil prices had plummeted the summer before. Cowper, a Democrat, forecast gloomy times ahead and sent lawmakers a bill to re-establish the state income tax they had repealed six years earlier. As chairwoman of the House State Affairs committee, Ulmer was among the first to pick up the ball for the governor in a debate that sounds remarkably similar to the one taking place today.

"It will never get easier economically and politically to adopt an income tax than it is today," Ulmer said on Feb. 27, 1987. "Next year is an election year, and you know how we all run for cover then."

Critics in the Legislature said government spending should be cut first. Among them was State Rep. Randy Phillips of Eagle River, who said his constituents didn't want to be taxed, according to newspaper accounts of the time. "State government . . . has to do a lot more with a lot less before they'll go along with a tax," he said.

Terry Martin, a Republican former lawmaker from Anchorage, served on the State Affairs Committee when Ulmer ushered Cowper's bill in for hearings. "She was for it from the very beginning," Martin said this week.

Ulmer says the Legislature had little choice but to consider taxes in 1988.

"We had no way to fill this incredibly large cap created by very, very, very low (oil) prices," she said. "What were we going to do? Close schools?"

Alaska lucked out.

"Once again, Alaska got fortunate from the standpoint of having things happen that we really didn't have any control over," Ulmer said.

Legal settlements of oil tax, and revenue disputes with the industry and the federal government eased the crunch, and the 1989 wreck of the Exxon Valdez created an economic spark even as it spoiled Prince William Sound.

Martin describes Ulmer's attitude as a lawmaker to a "doting mothering grandmother: 'Don't worry about nothing; the government can solve all your problems. . . State employees got problems? We can take care of that. Anyone that comes up with any problems, government can take care of that.' "

Ulmer disputes that depiction of her philosophy of government.

"Government has a role in providing basic things like public safety and streets, education, strong universities," she said, but isn't the answer to everyone's problems.

And she said lawmakers should stay out of some decisions -- abortion is an example -- that are better left to individuals.

In her four terms in the Legislature, Ulmer

sponsored scores of bills. Some became law, some did not. Among them were measures to expand retirement benefits for state employees, to pay employees a cash incentive for ideas that helped the state save money, and to require the state to make sure employees were protected from ailments caused by working with computer terminals.

She authored bills to make it easier for the state to collect child support payments from delinquent parents, to expand domestic violence protection to parents, grandparents, children and grandchildren as well as spouses, and to extend insurance coverage to pay for routine mammograms.

"That was a health issue that was incredibly important at the time," Ulmer said. "There were only a few states that required insurers to do it."

She supported legislation to reduce hazardous wastes, encourage recycling, require sex offenders to register with state troopers after their release, and create a commission to push for construction of a natural gas pipeline. She voted for a bill to allow Alaskans to carry concealed weapons, arguing that it probably wouldn't do much damage in a state that already had permissive gun laws. To prove her point, she carried an unloaded handgun into the debate on the House floor.

Ulmer says she has vigorously supported opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil exploration, but the soft money group Supporting Alaska's Free Enterprise has pointed out that in 1991 she opposed proposals to pump up to \$5 million into a national lobbying campaign to open ANWR.

Ulmer said she voted against pumping extra money into the ANWR lobbying effort because the Hickel administration didn't do a good enough job of justifying it. The Legislature had funded an ANWR effort the previous year.

"It just seemed like an incredible amount of money to me, and I felt, you know, it's something we actually elect our congressional delegation to do," she said.

BACKING CRIME LEGISLATION

Former state Rep. Gail Phillips, a Republican who lost a bid for her party's lieutenant governor's nomination this year, served four years in the House with Ulmer. During one session, Phillips was majority leader and Ulmer was minority leader.

"Fran and I got along very well," Phillips said recently. "She's very articulate, and she can speak at great lengths on a subject.

"But, as with all of us, she doesn't particularly care to be challenged."

Phillips said Ulmer pushed for new programs to protect children and expand day-care assistance. Sometimes they agreed and sometimes they didn't, Phillips said.

Ulmer sponsored a number of crime bills, including successful legislation to increase penalties for physical

abuse of minors and for repeat DWI offenders. But Phillips said Ulmer opposed legislation waiving juveniles accused of heinous crimes into adult court.

Ulmer said she voted against the juvenile waiver measure because it made the switch to adult court mandatory.

"What was at issue was whether a juvenile would be automatically waived, or would have a hearing before a judge," she said. "I was voting for retaining the ability of a judge to decide whether or not it was appropriate."

"The (Ulmer bills) I found greatest fault with were her proposals to lock up additional lands into marine parks in Southeast," Phillips said. "I certainly didn't support those."

Ulmer said the marine parks legislation that Phillips referred to was requested by Juneau constituents who wanted to protect "a few small areas around Auke Bay."

Ulmer also pushed legislation on telecommunications and computer technology and backed setting up an information technology center at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

"Bear in mind, this was back in the 1980s, long before people were talking about the Internet and e-commerce and so forth," said former state Rep. Red Boucher, an Anchorage Democrat. "She shared my vision then that information technology was going to play a vital role in the global and national economy and that Alaska should be a player in it."

Ulmer's interest in telecommunications continued as lieutenant governor, where, as overseer of the state division of elections, she helped introduce computer-driven ballot boxes in most of the state's communities. The new technology provides accurate tallies in most elections hours earlier than was previously possible.

"Who did that?" Boucher said. "She did. The major role of the lieutenant governor is overseeing elections, and she did one of the best jobs in the country."

Phillips, however, thinks the state could and should have done more to usher Alaska into the information age.

"We've had a lot of meetings, a lot of task forces, but we haven't accomplished what we need to have accomplished," Phillips said. "She has spent a lot of time at it, but the Legislature cannot, the administration cannot, take credit for pushing Alaska into the 21st century on that."

For all the elections division's successes over the past eight years, a blunder in the last days of this year's campaign has given Ulmer's opponents some fresh ammunition. Because of a computer coding error, about 40 percent of the official election pamphlets the division sends to voters were mailed to the wrong districts.

"Unfortunately it had a big cost, and it's a mistake

we deeply regret," she said. Division employees worked hard all year to account for the effects of redistricting, sending out new voter registration cards and drawing new precinct boundaries.

"They have done an amazing job, and I'm just so sad that a lot of them are getting, 'You didn't do it right.' Well, there was one thing that wasn't done right and thousands of things that were."

Gross, Hammond's attorney general and still a staunch Ulmer supporter three decades later, said Ulmer was a star in Hammond's camp from the beginning.

"She had the intelligence and wit and ability to hold her own in a group of what I used to consider pretty sophisticated people," he said, adding that he thinks Ulmer has grown over the years.

"She's a much deeper, heavier thinker today than she was then," Gross said. "She was very bright and capable in the Hammond administration, . . . but now she has a tremendous knowledge and depth of understanding."

Reporter Don Hunter can be reached at dhunter@adn.com or at 907-257-4349.

PHOTOS

Gubernatorial candidates Sen. Frank Murkowski and Lt. Gov. Fran Ulmer shared a handshake and a smile after their KTUU-sponsored debate Wednesday evening at the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts. (Photo by Erik Hill / Anchorage Daily News)

Ulmer spoke to a small crowd in June at Valley of the Moon Park, addressing themes for her campaign for governor. (Photo by Evan R. Steinhuauser / Anchorage Daily News)

Lt. Governor Fran Ulmer spoke to a group of Manley residents during a community meeting in July. Ulmer visited villages and communities in central Alaska by boat on a summer campaign trip along the Tanana and Yukon rivers. (Photo by Bradley J. Boner / Anchorage Daily News)

Ulmer chatted with 11-year-old Richie Carcamo and his grandmother Nina Pineda at Valley of the Moon Park in Anchorage during her first major campaign platform speech in June. (Photo by Evan R. Steinhuauser / Anchorage Daily News)

Former Gov. Jay Hammond shares a word with Ulmer after a Republicans for Ulmer Committee lunch in August. At the luncheon, held at the 4th Avenue Theatre in Anchorage, Hammond spoke about why he supports Ulmer's gubernatorial bid. (Photo by Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News)

Copyright © 2008 The Anchorage Daily News
(www.adn.com)