Chena Ridge Friends, Fairbanks, Alaska

Minute on Sustainable Economics (approved January 21, 1996)

We applaud the efforts of Federal and State governments to address the current deficit problem. However, we fear that, in their haste to cut budgets, they have focused on programs critical to the well being of millions of Americans. Budget cuts in the areas of social services; health, education, housing and nutrition disproportionately impact the lower middle class and poor, especially women, children, and the elderly. The targeted programs do not represent major portions of the overall budget of the government. For instance, welfare is only about 1.5% of the federal budget; AFDC is about 2% of the Alaska State budget. In the United States today, one in four children lives in poverty. Two thirds of welfare recipients are children. In Alaska, there are, on average 1.9 children in an AFDC family. Young women head eighty-one percent of these AFDC families. We need to evaluate our priorities in cutting programs so that we can preserve the public good.

There are real moral issues involved in how we choose to reduce the budget deficit while preserving the public good. The decisions we make now will define us as a nation and a state long into the future. We advocate a shift from an economy based on military and corporate subsidies to one which benefits the general public, and looks to the future. We believe that the idea of creating a healthy economy through unlimited growth and rapid development is no longer viable. It is simply not sustainable over the long term. We have already reached the point at which a standard of growth for growth’s sake is now becoming a threat to the well being of the world’s population. In the United States, our present economic philosophy promotes rapid growth in all areas: economic expansion, resource extraction, human population increases, development of wild and open lands, privatization and development of public lands, etc. This type of economic system no longer serves as a viable model to carry humanity into the next century.

We advocate slow, careful development of resources to maximize the public benefit, especially to local populations. We oppose large-scale projects to extract raw resources for sale to large out-of-state or foreign corporations. This system degrades the environment and keeps local economies from reaching their potential. This perpetuates a false system based on unlimited growth, driven by an unstable market. This type of system also removes resources from the public trust for the benefit of a few corporations and their owners.

We mentioned above the fact that public welfare programs do not make up a major portion of the federal or state budgets. There are other types of “welfare” which constitute a much larger portion of these budgets, yet these programs are not slated for reduction. These “welfare” programs include corporate, military and bureaucratic subsidies. There are many examples of these types of subsidies: tax breaks for corporations and wealthy individuals; cost over runs for contractors; military research and development; cost inefficient roads and building construction; subsidized logging and mining operations; farm subsidies, etc. The current budget reduction efforts at both the state and federal level do not consider these larger “welfare” programs in their discussions. In fact, the current congressional budget proposal includes an additional $7 BILLION dollar appropriation for the Department of Defense. This is on top of the increase already proposed by President Clinton. No one discusses this money as part of the deficit reduction solution, yet it could pay for the cuts proposed for programs for the poor, the unemployed and underemployed, and the elderly.

We urge our state and federal representatives and senators to rethink their current policies. What has happened to the “Peace Dividend” we were told would arrive with the end of the Cold War? At a time when the government is closing military bases, more money than ever pours into the military budget. There are not even plans to transform these military bases into public facilities, in most instances. We feel it is time to legislate for the public good with an eye towards the future. Medicaid and Medicare, AFDC and welfare programs, education, and housing programs must be preserved. This can be affordable by doing such things as: retaining taxes for the wealthier families and corporations; keeping the capital gains tax; decreasing the purchase of military hardware; investing in basic research; limiting resource extraction subsidies, etc.
We also urge our leaders to re-think their energy policy and develop a rational program based on efficiency, conservation, and alternative technologies. The market price of commodities such as oil, coal, timber and fisheries must include the cost of pollution, loss of wilderness and depletion of resources. By including all these costs, the price of resources will rise, and their value will increase. Conservation and re-use of materials will follow as the commodity rises in value. Environmental safeguarding actually creates jobs while improving the quality of life for all.

We urge each citizen to take his or her place in creating a sense of public benefit for all by becoming active in advocating a sustainable economy for the future. This requires involvement in community decisions regarding resource use, the quality of life, and the health of the community and its environment, education for our children and care for our elders. We support tolerance, non-violent conflict resolution and peace efforts on local, state, federal and world levels. In an era of “belt tightening, let us each start within ourselves to work towards a sustainable future for our well-educated, healthy children. Speak out so that our leaders know that we value each person and his or her needs. Housing, food, education and health care will define our future, and should be our priority.