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A conversation with interim UAF chancellor Brian Rogers

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Interview with UAF
chancellor Brian Rogers

FAIRBANKS -- *After being involved with the University of Alaska Fairbanks in various ways, Brian Rogers just completed his first semester as UAF's interim chancellor. The News-Miner sat down with him to talk about how it went. Rogers discussed a number of topics including the Life and Science Innovation and Learning Community, the financial situation at UAF and what he hopes to accomplish next semester. The following is an excerpt from the interview.*

How was your first semester?

It was great. It was interesting coming back after being away from the university some and being back here on a day-to-day basis for the first time in almost 15 years and really getting a sense of the vitality and the number of different things going on here. And I think my biggest learning experience was how many different things was happening at UAF.

Can you elaborate on that?

An example in the research arena — when I started digging in what we were doing in life-sciences research, finding out what we were doing on Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. And the work our researchers are doing to understand the mechanisms behind Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and to start thinking about what might that mean in terms of how we might screen for, maybe one day, how we might treat for it. ...

Or talking with the students that did the rocket launch last week. Seeing them in the laboratory in December and hearing what they were doing in terms of designing their launch and realizing for some of them it's four years of collegiate work that was going to be encapsulated in a five-minute launch and how much they had going to get there.

It seems like every day there is something I learn about that's going on that I realize how many stories there are at UAF and how hard it is to be able to tell even a reasonable subset of those.

What are your thoughts on not securing funding for the Life and Science Innovation and Learning Facility?

Well, I'm pleased that line item appears in the governor's budget although there are no general fund dollars attached to it. It's only authority for us to borrow and expend the borrow proceeds but I think it shows a recognition by the governor that this is an important project.

We will, of course, be highly dependent on success on what happens to the price of

oil between now and the legislative session. My own expectation is oil prices will begin to rise again more toward what might be more normal — \$75 level or something like that. If that happens soon enough, the legislature may be able to help us with some general fund appropriations this year. We'll continue to make the case for it. We'll bring some of our researchers and students to Juneau to talk to legislators about it. But I recognize the governor's dilemma or the challenge she has when the price of oil yesterday was \$32.

What is the plan for the facility now?

I don't expect major modifications from here, considering the building as a two-part building. One for instruction, one for research, with the research one-half funded with bonded funds is pretty much how it's going to stay. There might be some reconfiguration of hallways, etc., but the core — how much space for what purposes — won't change unless we get a dramatic rise in the price of materials.

What are UAF's strengths and weaknesses?

I think our No. 1 strength is our people we have in our locations in Alaska. It's really a mix of that — high-quality people who are passionate about instruction and about research scholarship. And a location that is ideal for some fields of study — certainly for environmental sciences and we have an ideal location for physical sciences and environmental sciences, of the mechanisms of climate change. There are a series of areas where our location makes all the difference. But the location alone doesn't make it if you don't have quality faculty and staff to carry it out. So it's a high-quality of people who are committed to be here and to go forward with instructional

research. ...

And the weaknesses?

I think one of the weaknesses on the funding side has been that we have an older physical plant and have not had the annual budget from the state to keep up, so we build a maintenance backlog that gets in the way of some of the things we want to do. I think we have not renewed our facilities at the rate we should, and as an example there is student housing, which was perfectly fine when I went to school here in 1970 but some of the same housing is here from 1970 and that's not where the market is here today. ...

I think the second is a cultural issue, here on the fiscal and risk side, that is one of extreme caution and I think it derives from a period in the 1970s where the university had some real financial challenges, but what we tend to do now is to pre-check everything and require a little more bureaucratic steps to make sure everything is perfect, rather than holding people accountable and having a few less checks in advance. I think a more efficient way to operate is to delegate responsibility and authority. Check up on people and hold them accountable if they have not followed the rules rather than check in advance to make sure they follow the rules on every transaction. And I understand where that came from. I think that slows us down a little bit and it makes the institution a little less responsive than it otherwise could be.

Do you plan to make changes or modify the goals and priorities you outlined in your convocation speech?

I think there is likely to be minor changes. Some of the emphasis areas might evolve

over time but I think those core themes of thinking first about the people here — students, faculty, staff — thinking about how to better engage the communities we serve and to be in constant process of working with all of our communities and clearly trying to move forward with decisions. I think those general themes are likely to remain the same.

What actions we can take will certainly change in the new fiscal environment. When I prepared the convocation speech, the price of oil was twice as high as it is now and we're likely to see some fiscal limits and that will cause us to take a little longer and maybe put a little more emphasis on how can we be more efficient and reduce the steps in workload so that we have more resources to focus on our core mission.

What do you hope to accomplish in the second semester?

Second semester we have the management of the existing budget and ensuring that we stay accountable to the (University of Alaska) president and others and we hit our management goals and spending targets for the campus as a whole. ... We are certainly hopeful we will see an increase in a number of students this semester. We have been out there pretty aggressively recruiting. The numbers are looking good so far — it doesn't close for another week and a half — but to try to build our student numbers particularly knowing in a time of economic stress a lot of people go back to college, we want to make sure we're meeting those needs.

I'll spend a little bit of time in Washington, D.C., talking with some of the agencies that supported us trying to ensure the president's budget, stimulus package, other federal opportunities include those things that are appropriate for UAF.

Is there a message you would like to tell the students returning to UAF for the second semester?

Well, I think for the students, it's an exciting time in Alaska. We've got some fiscal challenges, but we've also got a lot to look forward to. While the rest of the nation is suffering from a pretty deep recession, we've got it pretty good here right now. And I think it's important to us that we all try to keep the momentum going in Alaska so we don't get caught in the same bind other states are.

And I also want to make sure they do their homework.