



# Representative Beth Kerttula

## House Democratic Leader

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January 21, 2014

Commissioner Curtis Thayer  
Alaska Department of Administration  
550 W. 7<sup>th</sup> St. Ste 1970  
Anchorage, AK 99501

Dear Commissioner Thayer:

I am writing on behalf of several constituents who have spoken with my office regarding the implementation of the Department of Administration's Universal Space Standards in state-owned and leased offices. I looked into the situation and was concerned to learn of what may be real problems, which I have enumerated below.

Thank you and your Juneau-based leadership for inviting the Juneau legislative offices to visit the remodeled offices on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of the State Office Building last spring. The Division of General Services facility is indeed modern and full of light. However, the work done by DGS may not be indicative of a typical state office. There is great diversity in the work done by different public employees. The needs of a state employee in offices that rely heavily on computer use are far different than a biologist at the Department of Fish and Game, an engineer at the Department of Transportation, or a manager in any department who needs to have confidential discussions with employees.

As one example, the universal space standards misunderstand the broad diversity of work done by public servants. The low walls and so-called "clean desk policy" greatly reduce privacy and personal space. For managers, supervisors, or human resources officers, many of whom have worked their way to their position through years of loyal service, a small office provides an informal place for them to talk with other employees without drawing undue attention.

I recognize that the benefits of Universal Space Standards include improved ambient light from lowering the cubicle walls and the ability to electrically adjust the desk height. The light issue certainly has merit but the tradeoff is a loss of professional privacy and confidentiality that should be seriously considered for each position. In addition, the loss of vertical storage space is concerning. I would also point out that the desks should be considered independently of the space standards issue since they could be implemented without changing the desk configuration.

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### **Physical space needs**

First and foremost, because this project is about physical space, I'm concerned about the space needs of various state employees that may not be met under Universal Standards. Many state employees require a large amount of space and various pieces of equipment to fulfill their duties. Because I am familiar with the issues at the Douglas Department of Fish & Game offices, I will use them as an example.

Most of the biologists have substantial physical equipment in their work spaces. Currently, larger items such as boats are kept in a remote storage facility. Because there will be less on-site storage space under Universal Space Standards, I am concerned that smaller and more frequently used items, such as monitoring equipment, cameras, samples, and education supplies will also be stored off-site. This could seriously reduce productivity by extending the timeline to perform duties that require this equipment.

Throughout the building, there is significant use of large flat wall and partition surfaces for necessary tools such as whiteboards and large format maps. They also use their vertical storage space for research, documents, and professional journals. Nothing in the new plans allows for these important productivity tools.

### **Misunderstanding of inter- and intra-department relations**

I am also concerned that there seems to be a lack of consideration for inter- and intra-departmental relations when planning shared spaces under the Universal Space Standards.

While there are two Fish and Game storage rooms built into the plans at the Douglas office building, they are small for the needs of the department and are located at extreme opposite ends of the building instead of in a centralized location. It is unclear how these would be allocated, administered, or secured. Presumably, they would have to be shared by workers in five operating divisions: Commercial Fisheries, Sport Fish, Wildlife, Habitat, and Subsistence. However, each division's employees have distinct work responsibilities, and they don't necessarily work closely with scientists in other divisions. The physical location of the closets would indicate that they would be used primarily by employees in Commercial Fisheries and Habitat. Even if a shared use policy is implemented, it is unrealistic and unproductive to have a Wildlife biologist, for example, traverse two long hallways and a flight of stairs multiple times per day to access their own equipment.

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Juneau, Petersburg, Skagway, Gustavus, Tenakee Springs, Kupreanof, Excursion Inlet, Hobart Bay  
State Capitol ♦ Juneau, Alaska 99801-1182 ♦ (907) 465-4766 ♦ Fax (907) 465-4748

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Similarly, all of the Fish and Game divisions will be sharing a single café for kitchen and break room purposes. Because of proximity, the café on the second floor will inevitably be used almost solely by Corrections employees and the future employees that occupy the to-be-emptied wing of the building. By increasing the distance and decreasing the convenience of break or meal rooms, the remodel may actually encourage more employees to bring unlicensed refrigerators, having the opposite effect of one of the key stated goals of the program.

### **Savings may be overstated**

The state pays about \$70 million annually in rent and ownership costs for owned and leased buildings throughout Alaska. The published reports provide a best case scenario of \$125 million in savings over that 20 year period, about a 7% savings. However, to reach these numbers, overall square footage would have to be reduced by over 30%. This is likely unrealistic, especially considering the special cases and workarounds that can be obtained on a case-by-case basis.

The reports do not take into account costs in terms of diminished productivity and general state employee morale. Many believe the standards will decrease employee retention, increase turnover and training costs, and by extension decrease the ability of the affected agencies to provide essential public services. Over time, a disaffected workplace and poor recruitment may end up necessitating outsourcing state employees to the private sector. This would be, in incalculable ways, a catastrophic result.

Parking needs will also erode the projected savings. By reducing the square footage per employee, the parking need for each building increases. It would be impractical for the state to rent a smaller portion of a building if they would still require that building's entire parking lot. Alternatively, it is also costly to rent remote parking.

### **Lack of employee involvement in process**

Some programmatic shortcomings, at least at the Douglas facility, appear to result from a lack of communication. By many accounts, this has been a top-down process. Rank and file employees indicated no opportunities for input, and communication appears to have been limited to senior administrators and DGS leadership. Employees were not asked to and even prohibited from explaining their space needs when architects were touring buildings.

Many employees are afraid to speak out against the space standards for fear of retribution. Observation during the formal tours (including the recent tour of Atwood Building facilities

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after the 10/17 Senate hearing in Anchorage) indicated sufficient negativity to conclude that state employees are unhappy with the changes. Meanwhile, the state facilities manager spoke openly about how much she loves her new cubicle, whereas we have heard that in fact she is still occupying a large corner office in the Atwood Building.

**Requested follow-up**

As soon as practical, I would appreciate it if you could provide my office with the following:

- Records of communications between the Douglas-based ADF&G and ADOC employees (rather than the headquarters leadership) and DGS, as well as the state architectural and design contractors, regarding needs and desires related to the Douglas office remodel. I am particularly interested in the evolution of the space program and how it differs from current uses.
- Any memoranda or analysis of what will be done with the space that is "freed up" on the south wing of the upper floor of the Douglas building, whether another state agency is envisioned as a tenant, what will happen to that agency's current space, and how parking for these employees will be accommodated.
- Record of any requests for special accommodation or waivers from space standards from any agency since the unveiling of the Universal Space Standards protocols, the responses and eventual resolution of these requests, and the eventual cost impact (or decreased savings) from these changes. This analysis should also indicate what proportion of remodeled or planned-remodeled spaces obtained which waivers, so that the costs could be extrapolated to the full state portfolio.
- Analysis of the reduced electrical load, if any, estimated to result from the elimination of personal appliances under the new standards.
- Any studies, analyses, or internal memoranda on workplace psychology that were used in the creation of the standards.

I sincerely hope you will use these observations and suggestions as part of a comprehensive rethinking of the universal space standards policy. In the short term, I strongly suggest you reconsider the Douglas building remodel in light of the unique needs of the scientists and other professionals that are and will be using the space.

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One final thing, by the time you receive this you will have heard that I am resigning the legislature to take a position at Stanford University. However, this issue is important enough that I am sending you this letter as one of my last official acts as Representative. I will be in my office until Friday, January 24 and would appreciate hearing back from you by then. After that time, please follow-up with the District 32 legislative office, and feel free to contact me on my cell at 209-5104.

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Beth Kerttula', with a stylized, flowing script.

Representative Beth Kerttula

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