

## Meet John Williams, President of the Board



It's hard to believe that when John Williams was first offered a job in Fairbanks in 1962, he had to first ask where it was. The job was for a company called Whitney Brothers Plumbing and Heating. The pay was \$1000 a month and John was 23 years old. After determining that Fairbanks was in Alaska, John got himself a round trip ticket, thinking he'd return to his home town of Los Angeles after fulfilling the one-year contract he was offered. Instead, he did what so many of us who find ourselves in Alaska do. He stayed. Fifty-two years, a wife, four children and eight grand children later, John is still living the Alaska dream and has yet to use that one-way ticket.

Well known and respected for his years of public service, John's political aspirations began in Fairbanks, where he ran for the State Legislature in 1966, but lost in the general election. When the opportunity presented itself in 1968 to work in the Collier's Ammonia and Urea plant (now Agrium), he packed his bags, left Fairbanks and headed to the Kenai Peninsula.

Undeterred by his loss in Fairbanks, John would later run successfully for Mayor of both the City of Kenai and the Kenai Peninsula Borough, serving the City for 18 years and the Borough for three. In between, he even threw his hat in the ring for

Lt. Governor in 1990, losing to Jack Coghill, who ran as an Independent with Governor Wally Hickel. John Williams' political career alone would fill a book.

As Mayor of the City of Kenai during the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, John helped organize and participated in the International Conference of "Oiled" Mayors in Valdez in 1989. The "Oiled Mayors" Conference was a meeting of Mayors from coastal communities affected by the AMOCO Cadiz oil spill off the coast of France and the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in Prince William Sound. Meeting in Valdez, the mayors discussed common experiences from these environmental catastrophe's and laid the ground work for the Oil Pollution Act of 1990. During this process, Mayor of the Kenai Peninsula Borough Don Gilman and Jim Carter, who later would become one of Cook Inlet RCAC's Executive Directors, promoted the idea of a mechanism for public oversight for Cook Inlet as well as Prince William Sound. As Mayor of the City of Kenai, John was part of the delegation that went to Washington, D.C., and met with Senator Ted Stevens to promote the idea. According to John, the beginning years of the Council were focused on trying to find somebody to bring industry and stakeholder groups together. He considers the appointment of John Douglas—a retired drilling and production manager, and mining and petroleum consultant with strong ties to industry—as the City of Kenai representative on the Board of Directors a major force in making the RCAC gel. Douglas would go on to serve the board from 1992 to 2009, and played an enormous role in shaping the future of the Cook Inlet RCAC. After John Williams' retirement from public service, Mayor Pat Porter appointed him in 2010 as the City's new representative on the Cook Inlet RCAC Board of Directors, where he continues to serve and is currently President.

One could assume that John would be most proud of his 21 combined years of service as mayor. Certainly, Kenai was largely undeveloped when he first moved there in 1968. As John describes it, there was little construction and few facilities, and most workers lived out north or in trailers. He is proud of the building and growth that happened under his leadership. But when asked what he considers his greatest legacy, John is most proud of his role as an instructor for 17 years at the Kenai Peninsula Community College (now the University of Alaska Kenai Campus), which, as an instructor, he helped establish along with Dean Tom Wagner, Clayton Brockle, and Betty England, who served as the college's secretary. Together, they launched a whole new school of technology in a warehouse. John said he's most proud of the fact that since that humble beginning, hundreds of students have passed through the college's doors, many of whom are retiring after full careers.

John is a self-described open book and a noted story teller, but surprisingly modest considering all he's done. He doesn't like to brag about himself, but ask him about his family and John can tell you each and every one of his three daughters' and one son's accomplishments, what they do for a living, how proud he is of them; what each one of his eight grandchildren is doing, where they are going to school, or, if graduated, what they're doing now, how proud he is of his grandson's military service and tours of duty, and about his happy marriage—46 years in December—to Sharon, the daughter of a pipe welder from the Tri-cities in Washington. Among this hobbies, John enjoys collecting Lionel Trains. Not surprising, for somebody who likes to know how things work and to make things run.