



Mines protest briefly interrupts luncheon

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Michael Penn | Juneau Empire -

Lt. Gov. Byron Mallott, Mayor Merrill Sanford and British Columbia Minister of Energy and Mines Bill Bennett have their private lunch interrupted by protesters representing Southeast Alaska environmental groups at the Hangar Ballroom on Wednesday.

At a lunch with city and state officials organized by City and Borough of Juneau Mayor Merrill Sanford's office, some protestors entered the room as attendees were beginning to eat. The protest was an offshoot of an earlier rally on the steps of the Capitol building.

Shortly after Lt. Gov. Byron Mallott and British Columbia Minister of Energy and Mines Bill Bennett spoke, protestors entered the Hangar ballroom waving signs and chanting. After the chants ended, some called out "Please protect our rivers!" "Salmon first" and "No more Mount Polley."

Protestor Chris Niemi, who participated in an earlier rally on the Capitol steps but not the luncheon offshoot, said mines have ruined fisheries in other areas she has lived.

"Mines have not had a very good history of cleaning up their mess," she said. "They've proven over and over again they can't be trusted."

Protestor Martin Niemi, who also participated in the Capitol rally, not the luncheon protest, said both his grandfathers were immigrants from Finland who worked at what is now known as the Berkeley Pit in Butte, Montana.

“It’s so acidic that it kills the birds when they land in it,” he said. “I love people to have jobs. I love people to be happy and make money, but I don’t like pitting one resource against another. Especially when one is such a good one and such a healthy one, and it’s already here.”

Bennett told attendees prior to the protesters’ arrival that the trip has been successful so far.

“I think we have made significant progress toward understanding each other,” he said.

Sanford said in his opening remarks that BC officials were “very responsive, open and transparent with us” in a Tuesday meeting, where he said city officials asked some hard questions.

“They don’t want to destroy our rivers,” he said, pointing to similarities in BC and Alaska’s mine permitting processes.

Sanford thanked the protestors and they left shortly thereafter, allowing the lunch to continue.

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Editor's note: This article has been updated to reflect the fact that Martin and Chris Niemi participated in the Capitol rally, not the offshoot that interrupted the mayoral luncheon.