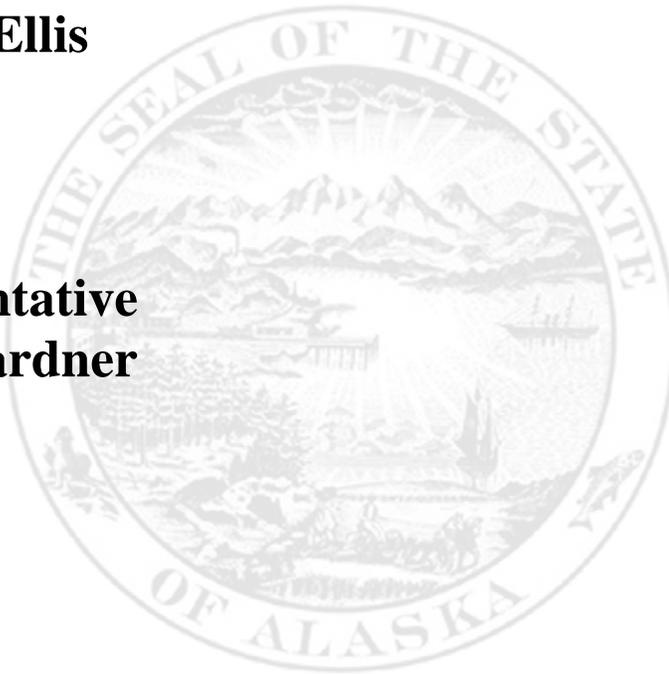




**Senator  
Johnny Ellis**

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**Representative  
Berta Gardner**

## ***Keeping in Touch! End of Session Newsletter***

### **Stimulus funds provide needed boost in economic downturn**

This week, Alaskans awoke to the news that the unemployment rate in the state reached 8.5%, the highest level since 1982. The global credit crisis is creating hardships for individuals or businesses who need capital. Rising energy prices make providing for the necessities of life a difficult proposition for many families. While state government is facing tight budgets and an uncertain revenue future, the federal government is able to take steps to prevent a bad situation from getting much worse.

Initially, the stimulus caused a number of concerns about potential federal strings, and the long term impact of accepting federal funds that may require state spending. These concerns were not limited to Alaska. As the package moved through the U.S.

#### ***Stimulus Highlights For Alaska***

- \$248 million for airport, road, bridge, and public transit **infrastructure**
- \$288 million for **education**, focused on the University of Alaska, low-income schools, and special education
- \$96 million for **energy** efficiency, weatherization, and housing
- \$68.6 million for **water quality**
- \$33 million for **job centers**, vocational training, and unemployment insurance
- \$20.7 million for additional municipal **revenue sharing**
- Numerous funds will go directly to municipalities, non-profits, and individuals, including **tax cuts** for workers, higher education, and first-time homebuyers.

*Contact the Legislature's Stimulus Clearinghouse if you have questions about how you may benefit from the stimulus package. They can be reached by phone at 1-888-480-4321 or by email at [akclearinghouse@denali.gov](mailto:akclearinghouse@denali.gov).*

Congress, a group of moderate Democratic Senators, including Alaska's Mark Begich, substantially revised and reduced it to target spending to one-time funding priorities.

The legislature carefully reviewed each pot of money to make sure they made sense for Alaska in the long-run. We are proud to report that we were able to accept every dollar available to Alaska. In fact, we made small changes to our laws to expand eligibility, especially for unemployment insurance and job training centers, a particularly timely need during this economic slowdown.

While we have accepted all of the funds, they are still subject to veto by the Governor. We pledge to continue to work with our legislative colleagues, Alaska's delegation in Washington, D.C., and the administration to make the case for these funds.



Senator Johnny Ellis and Representative Berta Gardner

# Report to the People

End of Session Newsletter for Midtown Anchorage



*Dear Friends and Neighbors,*

We hope this newsletter finds you well. The 2009 legislative session just ended, and we're writing to give you an update on some of the things we worked on. As always, **we'd like to hear from you**, so contact us if you have any questions on these, or any other issues.

With falling oil prices, Alaska faced potential budget shortfalls this year. Still, we were able to pass a balanced budget this year, in large part because Alaska will receive, unless the Governor vetoes them, roughly \$1 billion in federal Recovery Act funds for our schools, roads, disabled Alaskans, job training efforts, and other job-and education related initiatives. These funds could not have come at a better time, as Alaska's revenue picture was bleak this year.

At first there was a lot of discussion that many of these federal funds would only come to Alaska if we changed a lot of laws – that was the discussion of potential federal “strings”. After substantial research, the legislature was advised **the bulk of these funds come with no federal strings**, and many of them allow us to simply save state money, and use the federal funds in their place. Others are aimed at spurring job creation and educational advances.

It is our honor and privilege to serve you,

Senator Johnny Ellis

Representative Berta Gardner

**Senator Johnny Ellis**

**Rep. Berta Gardner**

## Legislation on the Move

*Here is a partial list of legislation that we worked on this year. With a shortened 90-day session, many pieces of legislation will have to be taken up when we reconvene in January.*

**Minor's Cell Phone Use (HB 15)**- Rep. Gardner's bill would prohibit minors from talking on their cell phone while driving. The idea is to limit the number of distractions for new drivers. HB 15 passed the House Judiciary Committee and awaits action in the Finance Committee.

**Denali KidCare (SB 13)** – Would raise Denali KidCare eligibility to 200% of the federal poverty limit. This bill passed the Senate but was not allowed a floor vote in the House.

**Minimum Wage Increase (SB 1 & HB 29)** – Alaska has the lowest minimum wage on the West Coast. The bill that passed increases it to \$7.75 next year, and keeps it at least \$.50 above the federal minimum wage.

**Merit-based Scholarships (SB 33)** - Creates a fund to help students attend postsecondary institutions in Alaska. SB 33 made it to the Senate Finance Committee.

**Electronic Medical Records (SB 132)** – Creates a secure Health Information Exchange system to improve the safety and cost effectiveness of healthcare in Alaska.



*Representative Gardner and Senator Ellis serve pizza and chat with constituents at their annual midsession constituent meeting on February 28 at Tudor Elementary School.*

# Senator Johnny Ellis

## Issue spotlight: Ellis bill would provide needed help for seniors and those with developmental disabilities

This session, one of my main priorities was a bill that would create a regular and fair rate review process for the providers of home- and community-based Medicaid services. Primarily used by seniors and people with developmental disabilities, these services allow their clients to live full lives amongst their family and friends. In addition, they are proven to reduce the need for institutional services and save the state significant amounts of money in the long run.



Most of these rates have not been increased since 2004, and many categories have not been examined in 10 years or more. Rising costs and frozen rates mean that the businesses that provide these services are losing their ability to do so. Without regular rate review, jobs will be lost and services will not be provided.

The bill passed the Senate unanimously, and I was joined by 11 co-sponsors of both parties. However, it stalled in the House Finance Committee, so we must return to try again next year.



*On February 24 Senator Ellis addressed the Key Coalition rally on the Capitol steps to help build support for the passage of Senate Bill 32—Rate Review for Home and Community Based Medicaid Services.*

## Leadership roles allow Ellis to better advocate for his district



*On March 3, Senator Ellis stepped up from his role as Senate Majority Leader to serve as Senate President for the day.*

This session, I was selected by my Senate colleagues to serve in two important leadership roles. I am honored to continue serving as the Majority Leader of the Senate Bipartisan Working Group, and pleased to add a seat on the Senate Finance Committee to my duties.

As Majority Leader, my job is to coordinate our caucus and help move the priorities of the 10 Democrats and 6 Republicans through the process. I represent the Senate in negotiations with the House and

the Administration, and am able to stand up for Anchorage's interests.

At the Finance table, we are responsible for the state's budgets, and this year we also took on the stimulus. The Finance Committee also must hear every bill that spends state money, giving me the chance to speak on almost every issue the Legislature faces.

These duties are an exciting and challenging addition to my workload, and I am focused on how these new roles can help me better represent our district.

*"Whether as Majority Leader or at the Finance table, I am intent on working for our neighborhoods and our state"*

### Capital and Stimulus budget highlights in a lean year:

- \$5 million for congestion relief—**Lake Otis Parkway and Tudor Road**
- \$8 million for Seward Highway reconstruction—**Dowling to Tudor**
- \$1 million for replacement of the **Egan Center roof**
- \$5.6 million for **Loussac Manor** restoration and refurbishment
- \$25 million for the **renewable energy** project grant fund
- \$23.5 million for flexible Anchorage **road construction** projects
- \$9.9 million for the **Alaska Court System** Anchorage campus

## Efforts to build up UAA programs continue

Even in a tight budget year there was continued progress toward making college more accessible for Alaska's students, and also enhancing the programs offered at UAA.

One of Senator Ellis' priority pieces of legislation is Senate Bill 33,



*In October Senator Ellis joined UAA chancellor Fran Ulmer and other legislators for the groundbreaking of the Health Sciences Building.*

which would create the Alaska Achievers Scholarship Program. This endowment would offer merit-based scholarships to students attending postsecondary school in Alaska. SB 33 made it to the Senate Finance Committee, and will be worked on over the interim and next year.

Additionally, as a member of the Finance Committee Senator Ellis pushed to include \$1.75 million in the University budget to open the brand new Integrated Sciences Building.

# Representative Berta Gardner

## Gardner continues commitment to education House Education Committee examines innovative alternatives, best practices, in an attempt to improve Alaska's schools

The new House Committee on Education has been studying Alaska's education system and working to find ways to improve on the state's abysmal 60 percent high school graduation rate. There were presentations to the Committee throughout the session that attempted to move the discussion beyond the annual funding debate. These discussions were varied and touched on standardized testing, special education identification and services, early education, charter and alternative schools, class size, student loans, vocation and technical education, boarding schools, and teacher training and retention, among other subjects.

**"The long-term goal is to enact fundamental changes that move beyond 'seat time' as a measure of student learning and success."**

Some potential outcomes to this work include state supported pre-schools, changing mandatory attendance to age 18, requiring additional math and science classes, offering individual education programs for at-risk students, standardized testing to identify student strengths and career tracks, and expansion of pre-schools.

Some education legislation passed this session, but the long-term goal is to enact fundamental changes that move beyond "seat time" as a measure of student learning and success. During the interim committee members will attend Board of Education meetings and will visit some of the schools, both urban and rural, which are showing promising results with a variety of approaches to



*Last spring Representative Gardner joined Anchorage School District Superintendent Carol Comeau and Senator Ellis for the dedication of Taku Elementary School's new ice rink. Rep. Gardner and Sen. Ellis secured money in the capital budget for this project.*

education. This is an issue Representative Gardner will track closely and keep her constituents updated on as progress is made.

### Get involved in your community!



*On February 27, while in Anchorage for their constituent meeting, Senator Ellis and Rep. Gardner took a tour of Fire Station 4 in Midtown. When home in Anchorage, Senator Ellis and Rep. Gardner attend the community council meetings in their district to give legislative updates and hear the concerns of residents. Community council meetings are a great way to make a difference in your neighborhood and make sure your voice is heard in the public process. To locate your local council and find out meeting times, go to [www.communitycouncils.org](http://www.communitycouncils.org).*

## Hot-button issues pop up during legislative session

This session saw a lot of time donated to House Bill 9, House Speaker Mike Chenault's (R- Nikiski) effort to reintroduce capital punishment in Alaska. The House Judiciary Committee spent weeks of valuable committee time hearing from death penalty experts and taking testimony from individuals around the state. A close committee vote allowed the bill to move to its next committee of referral, the Finance Committee, where it sits today.

Representative Gardner is adamantly opposed to the death penalty in Alaska and elsewhere. Our justice system is imperfect, sometimes unfairly applied, and subject to error on a regular basis. Additionally, contrary to public opinion, the death penalty is significantly more costly than life imprisonment.

Toward the end of session, the House passed House Resolution 10, which expressed displeasure and indignation at the manner in which the corruption prosecution of Senator Ted Stevens was handled. During floor debate on the resolution Rep. Gardner pointed out that if prosecutorial zeal and misconduct could happen in the case of US Senator it can and does happen to other less fortunate Americans. Rep. Gardner asked her colleagues to think about this resolution if the death penalty legislation came to the House floor for a vote, remembering that, when it comes to the death penalty, there is no chance to go back once it is applied.