

Alaska State Legislature

Session:
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Representative Justin Ruffridge District 7 - Kenai/Soldotna

Legislative recap for House District 7

I want to take a moment to share with you some updates from the 33rd Legislative Session, which concluded on May 15th. As the State Representative for House District 7, I deeply value the role residents play in the legislative process and believe it is important to share with you some key events that took place that you might be interested in hearing about.

Education was a common theme during the 33rd legislature, with conversations and votes surrounding funding, charter schools, homeschooling, and public schools taking center stage. Early in the session, the House took up SB 140, an omnibus education bill dealing with the BSA (Base Student Allocation), pupil transportation (buses), correspondence funding, charter schools, and continuing the education tax credit program. SB 140 passed the House and the Senate with overwhelming support but ultimately was vetoed by the Governor. The legislature took up the veto with the option to override or sustain the veto. I was a vote to override the veto. Ultimately, the vote to override fell short by one vote, and the veto was sustained. Some of the components of SB 140 were included in the final budget transmitted to the Governor, but instead of predictable and consistent BSA funding that would happen every year, monies were allocated as one-time funding just for this fiscal year.

Another significant development was a Superior Court judge's ruling that deemed portions of Alaska statutes governing allotments and individual learning plans for homeschool programs were unconstitutional. This ruling has raised concerns about the future and continuity of homeschool programs across the state, affecting thousands of students and their families.

As a result, I have been in constant consultation and worked closely with KPBSD leaders, homeschool staff, parents, and many others on this issue affecting roughly 23,000 students statewide. Together, we authored HB 400 to provide certainty and stability again to homeschool programs and their families. I am pleased to report the language of HB 400 was amended into HB 202 and passed the legislature on the final day of the session. HB 400 provides stability by ensuring homeschool programs can function with allotments and individualized learning plans for at least the next school year. However, it is not a permanent fix and should be a big topic of discussion in the 34th legislative session.

Lastly, I led the efforts to create HB 148 proposing modifications to the Alaska Performance Scholarship program (APS), and I carried the bill throughout the legislature. HB 148 boosts

award levels to tackle rising education costs, enhances the Career and Technical Education track, ensures earlier notification to students, and several other provisions. These enhancements provides students with greater financial resources for higher education in Alaska. HB 148 was amended in the Senate to include the Technical and Vocational Education Program (TVEP) and extended the Education Tax Credit program by four years.

I authored HB 309 and HB 371 on the healthcare front and both bills passed the legislature during this session. HB 309 allows optometrists to delegate routine tasks to their assistants and requires the Optometry Board to develop regulations, standards, and training requirements. These assistants will still perform all duties under the purview of the licensed optometrist. HB 317 streamlines the medical review organization (MRO) process. MROs exist to examine causes of death, illness, and injuries and compile statistics and reports to reduce such instances in the future which leads to a healthier Alaska.

Last year I authored HB 56 and HB 112 which were signed into law by Governor Dunleavy. HB 56 removed burdensome requirements for veterinarians and addressed privacy concerns for pet owners. HB 112 provided authority for pharmacists to prescribe epinephrine auto-injectors, aligned Alaska statutes with Federal regulations, and oversight of internet pharmacies.

I am proud of my office's results during the past two years because it takes a team effort to pass six significant pieces of legislation. I have had many conversations with Kenai & Soldotna constituents, non-profits, business owners, utilities, teachers, students, and elected officials which consistently shape my engagement with other legislators and my votes on legislation. I am grateful for the opportunity to serve as the State Representative for House District 7.

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