



# Dr. Alan Bates

Oregon Senate Majority Whip

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## House Calls Newsletter with Senator Alan Bates

### In This Issue

- [Budget Recommendations](#)
- [Commission for the Blind](#)
- [Smoking Cessation Tools](#)
- [For Your Information](#)
- [Contact Us](#)

### Quick Links

- [Sen. Bates Homepage](#)
- [The Healthy Oregon Act](#)
- [Bills and Laws](#)
- [Committee Agendas](#)
- [Oregon.gov](#)
- [The Oregon Channel](#)

[Join Our Mailing List!](#)

Dear Friend,

Welcome to House Calls my legislative newsletter. This newsletter highlights several items that have been developing over the last few weeks.

The Joint Ways and Means Committee released their recommendations for the 2009-2011 budget and I wanted to address what that means for you, my constituents. I have also included my response to your expressed concerns on the state of the Commission for the Blind. In addition, the Senate just passed a bill that will help assist people who are trying to quit smoking. Lastly, don't forget to read the *For Your Information* section at the end of this newsletter for links to important websites.

### Joint Ways and Means Budget Recommendations Released

\*This story appeared in the Medford [Mail Tribune](#)\*

Oregon is in the midst of the most difficult economic climate that we have experienced since the Great Depression. As a result, the May 15 state revenue forecast projects a deficit of \$4.2 billion for the 2009-2011 budget cycle.

For some perspective, this amounts to a loss of almost one-third of the state's budget. Because 94 percent of Oregon's general fund is allocated to education, public safety and human services, the huge shortfall facing the state means inevitable cuts to these vital services. In short, the fate of our education system, the safety of our communities, and services for our needy and elderly are at stake.

As co-chairman of the human services budget-writing committee, I know the painstaking work that has gone into crafting a budget that is sensitive to how this massive loss of funding can affect Oregon's schools, public safety, families and our most vulnerable children and elders. The budget presented is the product of months of work in your state Capitol and public hearings in cities across Oregon - including a large showing from our visit to Southern Oregon in late April. We listened to parents,

students, seniors and Oregonians from all walks of life.

In Jackson County alone, caseloads for food stamps are 40 percent higher than last year. This illustrates the difficulties Oregonians are experiencing that cannot, and will not, be ignored. We are at a critical juncture: The demand for services continues to climb at the very same time the state is experiencing an unparalleled shortage of funds.

To compound matters, unlike the federal government, Oregon's state government cannot print money or carry deficits. We are constitutionally required to balance our budget. In this instance, that means a mixture of targeted cuts reaching over \$2 billion and sensible revenue increases to make up the difference. In order to raise revenue, we may need to ask large corporations and Oregonians who make more than \$250,000 per year to carry a greater share of the tax burden.

I am encouraged by the business groups that have voiced support for this approach; they depend on many of the same services - a police force that protects us, roads that move freight, and schools that educate our work force. There is also wide agreement among financial professionals that Oregon's economy won't recover if the middle class doesn't.

Much has been said about the Republican proposal. In this economic climate, it is time for a bipartisan solution. Their suggestion for using ending fund balances from state agencies deserves serious consideration. That said, their budget assumes a \$14 billion general fund, but in reality we have only \$12.85 billion available. It calls for the same level of spending for state troopers as 2007, when we've hired 39 new troopers during the past two years. Finally, it doesn't take into account that unemployment has risen to over 12 percent statewide, and it ignores the 30-plus percent increase in requests for state assistance. A combination of both plans appears to be the most sensible approach: cuts, fund sweeps and moderate tax increases.

Let me be clear: Our economic recovery is not about Democrats or Republicans - it is

about what is best for Oregon and Oregonians, and will require a bipartisan effort that utilizes the best recommendations of both parties. We have a strong history of coming together to make it through difficult periods and this time is no different. I am confident that your elected officials are working in Salem to ensure that Oregon's best days are still to come.

To read the Ways and Means co-chairs' budget for yourself, please visit [Oregonbudget.gov](http://Oregonbudget.gov).

### **Commission for the Blind**

Over the last few weeks my office has received numerous emails and phone calls concerning the Commission for the Blind. At the Portland City Club last Friday, Governor Kulongoski spoke of our troubling economic situation. He expressed a need for a "new reality" that would mean sacrificing or changing much of what we want to do - to protect what we "absolutely must do." In this new reality, the Governor asked the legislature to suspend a number of agencies, boards and commissions while consolidating numerous others. The suspension of the Oregon Commission for the Blind was one of many.

The Governor's concerns are understandable. Significant questions have been raised in a recent state audit that uncovered questionable spending by the Oregon Commission for the Blind. To further compound the matter, the state budget for the upcoming biennium has been reduced from over \$17 billion in 2007-09 to \$13 billion, meaning that nearly a quarter of the budget must be cut back. This requires targeted cuts along with sensible revenue raising measures and the consolidation of certain agencies, boards and commissions.

As Governor Kulongoski noted in his remarks, "Oregon state government can no longer be all things to all people." I agree.

In these hard times, the agencies, commissions and boards that depend on general fund dollars may well need to be merged or suspended. The recommendation to suspend the Oregon Commission for the Blind is one possible option for what the future may hold - but it is not the only option. As both Governor Kulongoski and I have maintained, our number one goal is to protect Oregon's families and most vulnerable citizens. Remembering this serves as our guidance in determining the best course of action into the future. These decisions are tough and the results can be unsettling, but they must be made in order to put us on the road to recovery.

### **Smoking Cessation Tools**

The Senate passed SB 734, which will expand access to cessation programs for people who want to quit smoking. The bill will now go to the House for consideration. This bill would require health insurance providers to cover payments, coverage and/or reimbursement of up to \$500 for a tobacco cessation program. The programs can vary, but include counseling, medications or a



combination of both. Tobacco cessation treatments are the single most cost-effective health insurance benefit that we can provide. With smoking continuing to be the leading cause of preventable death in the US and a major contributor to health-related expenses, providing assistance to those who want to stop smoking is the most beneficial thing an insurer could do. This bill will provide additional tools to help people kick their habit and move towards a healthier lifestyle.

## For Your Information

### Go Oregon!

The Go Oregon! state stimulus plan is bringing jobs to Oregon by funding critical maintenance and energy efficiency projects at public facilities. These long-anticipated projects are spurring economic development throughout Oregon. As the projects continue, we encourage you to take advantage of the many excellent resources available to provide information about the Go Oregon! projects in your community.



Check out the [Go Oregon!](#) website.

### Oregon Senate Democrats Website

Visit the new [Oregon Senate Democrats](#) website to see what all the Democratic Senators are working on.

### Oregon Unemployment Online Claim System

At the Online Claim System you can:

- File a new application
- Claim a week of benefits
- Restart a claim
- Check the status of your claim
- Apply for direct deposit
- Change your address

Visit the [Oregon Employment Department](#) for this and other employment opportunities.

### The Legislative Intern Program

The Legislative Intern Program was created in 1976 to provide Oregon college and university students an opportunity of working and learning in a hands on legislative environment, learning leadership responsibilities as well as developing legislative process skills.

If you or someone you know is interested in interning at the Oregon State Capitol visit the [Internship](#) page at the Legislature's website.

### Explanation of Sine Die

Due to the importance of these other agenda items I wanted to report on, the Sine Die explanation mentioned in the last issue will be postponed to the next newsletter.

## Listening to Our Community

It is only with your input that I can continue to advocate for the needs of our communities. Please do not hesitate to



contact my office with any questions, comments, or requests for assistance. As always, my staff and I are eager to help in any way we can.

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