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Bill Offers Relief for High Energy Costs

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Sen. Gene Therriault, (R) North Pole, plans to introduce energy rebate legislation in the upcoming legislative session. The bill is designed to help Alaska residents cope with high energy costs, which have escalated in the last year.

“Although the high price for a barrel of oil is great for our state treasury,” Therriault said, “it results in a drastic hit to the pocketbook of every Alaska household.” Therriault’s bill is designed to give a portion of the current budget surplus back to Alaskans through at least one of three methods.

The first method is an energy rebate of \$250 for every citizen that qualified for the 2005 Permanent Fund Dividend. By using this list of pre-approved citizens, the state can avoid the time and cost of creating a new application procedure and speed the process of disbursing funds to Alaskans as their winter fuel bills come due for payment. “Whether they heat with gas, oil, electric or wood, all Alaskans are feeling the pinch from the rapid run up of energy prices,” Therriault said.

Second, the bill would provide the additional funds needed for the Power Cost Equalization program in the 2006 budget year. In consultation with Sen. Albert Kookesh (D-Angoon), Therriault drafted the legislation to cover the expected shortfall and further assist those who live in rural Alaska, where heating fuel has reached as high as \$5.40 per gallon in one village.

“I appreciate working with Sen. Therriault on this legislation and hope this is the start of a bipartisan effort to make Alaska better,” Sen. Kookesh said.

The final component of the energy assistance bill will provide \$10 million for the Low Income Weatherization Program. Therriault proposes this one-time increase in funding to weatherize more low income households so that energy savings can be achieved as soon as possible. “Providing weatherization assistance sooner rather than later will save energy for these Alaskans from this point forward,” Therriault said. “This is a way to take a very small portion of the current budget surplus and provide a benefit for recipients year after year.

Although funding for these initiatives would be counted as spending, Therriault said the amounts in the bill are a starting point that could be adjusted to an appropriate level through the committee process.

“The energy rebate would be accounted for much like the Permanent Fund Dividend,” Therriault said. “While many Alaskans are concerned about containing the growth of ongoing governmental

spending, they are likely to support a transfer directly to them that takes a portion of the surplus off the table.”

Therriault hopes the legislation will garner broad bi-partisan support. The bill will be circulated during the first release of pre-filed bills Friday, Dec. 30.

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